

CITY OF CUYAHOGA FALLS
2013 STATE OF THE CITY ADDRESS

MAYOR DON WALTERS

Wednesday, February 26, 2014

Members of the Cuyahoga Falls Chamber of Commerce, members of my Cabinet, members of City Council, dedicated City employees, and fellow citizens: thank you all very much for coming today. I am honored to be here with you to present my first annual State of the City Address.

I would like to thank the Chamber of Commerce for hosting this event. I greatly appreciate the efforts of this organization to promote our local businesses, and I look forward to working with all of you in the months and years ahead. I also want to offer a special thank you to Chamber CEO, Laura Petrella, for your 20 years of service and for all that you do for the business community in Cuyahoga Falls.

For those of you whom I haven't yet had the pleasure to meet, my name is Don Walters, and I am the new Mayor of Cuyahoga Falls. Although I am new to the Mayor's office, I am certainly no stranger to our local government. Prior to being elected Mayor, I served six terms on City Council and was unanimously elected Council President three times. I will go ahead and give away my age by saying that I am a proud, lifelong resident of 50 years.

I would like to begin by thanking all the former and current elected officials who have joined us today. Many citizens are unaware of the courage and sacrifice required to run for office and of the personal challenges that can accompany the glare of public scrutiny. I thank you all for your service and fortitude.

I would also like to thank each member of our Cuyahoga Falls City Council for your partnership, collaboration, and service to the community. Having served as a ward councilman for the previous twelve years, I fully appreciate the critical role of our City Council, as well as the ongoing commitment required to do the job well.

During my time on Council, I was often frustrated by what I considered to be a lack of sufficient communication between the Administration and Council, so I am committed to a more inclusive and less adversarial relationship between our two coequal branches of city government. I will draw on the strengths that each member of Council brings to the table, because I know that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Under my Administration, it will be an ongoing priority for Council members to be kept properly informed and to be provided with the details and background on City projects that will enable them to do their jobs to the best of their abilities. Already, various Council members have been invited to City Hall to attend meetings with developers looking to build or expand within our City. I firmly believe that this new practice will benefit both the Administration and Council, as well as the citizens we are all elected to serve.

We are very fortunate in Cuyahoga Falls to have some of the finest public employees to be found anywhere. So I would like to thank the women and men who work day-in and day-out to provide the high-quality City services we have all come to expect.

Being from the private sector myself, like many of you here, I am used to operating based on efficiency and profit. While government is not always positioned to function with the same mindset, there are certainly lessons to be learned from the best practices of private enterprise. So, upon taking office I sent a hand-signed letter to every full-time City employee, outlining my high expectations for a hard day's work on behalf of taxpayers, but also pledging a positive and respectful attitude toward all employees. We have found that this fair and cooperative approach has made a world of difference on morale and productivity thus far.

In the same vein, my Administration is also committed to a relationship with the City's six bargaining units that is based on mutual respect and productive communication. While there will inherently be occasions when we do not necessarily see eye-to-eye on a given issue, union leadership can trust that we will always operate in good faith, we will respect their fundamental right to organize and exist, we will honor the proper collective bargaining process, and we will value the work they do for the people of Cuyahoga Falls.

Of course, a new administration always brings the benefit of a fresh set of eyes and a fresh set of ideas. Knowing that importance, I would like to take this opportunity to proudly introduce my senior cabinet.

Luckily, our new Service Director, Eric Czetli, is no stranger to snow removal, having previously served as a Deputy Director for the Ohio Department of Transportation. His first few months here have certainly been a baptism by fire, but I would suggest that the results of this smooth transition speak for themselves, and our dedicated snow removal crews have kept our streets as clear as any in the area. Eric has vast experience in the public sector and is as dedicated as they come. According to our public service workers, Eric is the first Service Director to do ride-alongs in snow plows, sanitation trucks, and more, to gain that all-important first-hand knowledge of what it takes to properly service our citizens.

Our new Law Director is Russ Balthis. Russ has experience in both the public and private sectors, and has taken on every challenge this year like a seasoned veteran. As far as distinguished attorneys go, Russ ranks right at the top. Just like Eric, Russ is the first Law Director to spend hours in ride-alongs with our Police officers and Fire Department to gain that indispensable first-hand knowledge.

Our new Community Development Director is Diane Sheridan. Diane also has vast public experience in planning, zoning, community development block grants, and all the various tools needed to entice and retain businesses. In this short time, she has already been heavily involved with local business owners and developers and has spent many hours out in the field meeting with residents to address their needs. Diane's knowledge, vision, and innovation will serve our City well.

Our new Finance Director, Bryan Hoffman, brings first-hand experience in public finance. Bryan has carefully reviewed departmental spending and made important recommendations on how we can accomplish more with less. He was also instrumental in setting up an independent risk assessment audit for every department, which will allow us to take proper action for any improper reporting methods used in the past. I am thrilled to have Bryan on board managing our precious tax dollars.

Under my guidance, these four dedicated individuals provide the energy, experience, and fresh talent our City desperately needs. We are extremely fortunate to have them on board and I thank them for their service.

Our Police Department has a great new leader. Chief Jack Davis was chosen based on his knowledge, experience, and great leadership abilities. Like myself, Jack is forward-thinking and is never satisfied with the status quo. We are extremely fortunate to have Chief Davis and our dedicated men and women providing an unparalleled level of safety.

Rounding out our safety forces, Chief Paul Moledor continues to lead a Fire Department that is second-to-none. Paul ensures that our training and equipment are cutting edge to allow our dedicated men and women to offer the highest level of service in the entire area. Every Falls resident is fortunate to be served by such outstanding safety forces.

Today marks the fifty-seventh day of my tenure as Mayor of Cuyahoga Falls. Although my Administration has been on the job for less than two months, we have many positive changes underway. As the first new Mayor of our City in nearly three decades, I would like to take this opportunity to discuss some of the exciting and innovative new programs that you can expect from my Administration. So, in lieu of the usual run-through of departmental figures and annual totals, I will focus

the balance of my remarks on a selection of upcoming initiatives for the near future.

First off, I would like to mention a program you will be receiving more information about in your next monthly utility bill, that could even help our first responders save your life in the event of an emergency. The ***Cuyahoga Falls Envelope of Life Program*** will provide participating residents with a medical information form that can be easily accessed by paramedics in the event of an emergency.

This form provides vital medical information such as current medical conditions, medical history, current medications, and any known allergies. The completed form is placed in a magnetic envelope that should be located in a place that is easy for attending paramedics to find, such as the front of your refrigerator. This will provide our safety forces with the information they need when caring for you during an emergency. The program will be free to all Falls residents, and an *Envelope of Life* can be obtained by mail, telephone, or via the City's website, once the program is underway.

The next program I will mention is going to take the help of many of the people here today: the ***Cuyahoga Falls Shop Locally Incentive Program*** will seek to encourage Falls residents to spend more of their dollars right here at businesses in town. I look forward to working with many of you to help make this program a success, hopefully bolstering your bottom lines and stimulating the local economy at the same time. Please consider participating in this incentive program when the details are made available.

One way that we will be promoting the *Shop Locally Incentive Program* is through the ***New Homeowner Welcome Packets*** that will soon be provided to all new homeowners in the City. These welcome packets will include a mix of valuable coupons and discounts for local businesses, helping to encourage our newest residents to get into the habit of patronizing Falls businesses, and informing them about all the great establishments that we have to offer right here in their new town.

I also remain committed to reinvesting in our neighborhoods, which I view as the lifeblood of our community. I intend to work with City Council to expand the ***Neighborhood Excellence Initiative*** that has already begun to take shape, thanks to the dedicated efforts of a number of community-minded neighborhood leaders. Please stay tuned for details on the neighborhood group that will be forming in your part of town, and I urge all Falls residents to help preserve property values and our overall quality of life by ensuring that our neighborhoods are safe and organized.

In order to help encourage more of our young people to become civically engaged and to allow younger Falls residents the chance to offer their input and perspective on City issues, we are planning to establish a *Mayor's Youth Council* for the upcoming Fall semester. This advisory body will be comprised of high school students who apply to the program, and who will take the seats of our elected Council members at the conclusion of regular Council meetings.

Last, though certainly not least, I am pleased to announce that I am planning to reinstitute the popular *Senior Snow Removal Program*. This program was a tremendous aid to many Falls seniors, and our plan is to have the program up and running for the next Winter season. Additionally, we are developing a new *Senior Leaf Raking Program*, scheduled to begin this Fall, which utilize the community service efforts of high school students to help our seniors with the onerous and ongoing chore of leaf removal.

Of course, the preceding was merely a sampling of the initiatives and innovative programs that my Administration is planning to offer residents of our fine City. I look forward to sharing further details on these programs and more as they are finalized and rolled-out for implementation.

In closing, I would like to observe that the spirit of our community continues to unite neighbors, businesses, and civic leaders behind the common cause of building a brighter future for current residents and future generations alike.

The resolve of our citizens remains unbroken, and the force of this collective determination can and will bring the 'Falls Pride' back to our neighborhoods.

The potential of our town along the winding Cuyahoga River is as boundless as our will to keep the stream of progress and ideas flowing steadily over the rocky challenges ahead, uniting us all in a powerful current that will move our community forward.

So I am pleased to report that the state of our City is strong, and with the continued help and involvement of the good people of Cuyahoga Falls, it will continue to grow stronger each and every day.

Thank you all for joining me here today and taking time out of your busy schedule to be part of Cuyahoga Falls and its future.