



2016 STATE OF THE CITY
MAYOR DON WALTERS
February 22, 2017

I want to begin today by thanking the Cuyahoga Falls Chamber of Commerce for sponsoring our annual State of the City, but more importantly, for being such an impactful partner of our community. Our Chamber, led by CEO Laura Petrella, continues to work to grow our small businesses, and has created an organization that works together as a family, and that is what this city is all about. For the past three years, we have seen record-breaking numbers of ribbon cuttings for small businesses in Cuyahoga Falls, and I am pleased to announce that 2016 was no different with an astonishing 20 ribbon cuttings for new or redeveloped businesses. Though she is unable to be here today, many thanks belong to Board President Kathy Romito, whose service to our community is invaluable. There are few events that you will attend around the community where you don't see Kathy, and we are grateful for all that she does. I also want to take a moment to thank the Sheraton for hosting us in this great facility that was recognized last year as the #1 guest rated Sheraton in North America. Quite an accomplishment!

To my beautiful wife Stephanie, I thank you for continuing to always being by my side. I don't know where I would be without your love and support, but it would more than likely not be here.

I want to recognize and welcome the elected, community, and business leaders who have taken time out of their busy schedules to be here with us today. We have Bob Genet, who is here representing our County Executive Ilene Shapiro, Munroe Falls Mayor James Armstrong, Silver Lake Mayor Bernie Hovey, Tallmadge Mayor Dave Kline and Stow Mayor Sara Kline. I am grateful that we can all work together so incredibly well on collaborations that benefit the region as a whole, so that all residents can benefit from our collective efforts.

Stow Municipal Clerk of Courts Diana Colavecchio, who continues to do a phenomenal job at the court. I also want to recognize Josh Weemhoff, who is here representing Congressman Dave Joyce, and I want to thank them for their support of our Downtown Transformation Project. John Chlebina and Danny Karam are two of our respected developers who are instrumental in our redevelopment efforts on Front Street, and I want to thank them for being here today and for their continued investments in our city. Woodridge Schools Superintendent Walter Davis is here, and we are thrilled to watch as the new school is built on Quick Road. It will completely change the aesthetics of the area, enhance the educational experience in a campus environment, and we are very excited to see the project get underway. The Bulldog athletic teams have been doing phenomenally well with football, boys and girls cross country, basketball, wrestling, and bowling teams producing winning seasons and I could not be prouder of their accomplishments.

Dr. Todd Nichols, our Cuyahoga Falls Schools Superintendent is also here, and has been incredibly influential in various collaborations between the schools and the city. I am grateful for his willingness to work together with us to partner city government with our students. I am so proud that the Black Tiger Marching Band was voted Cleveland.com's Best High School Marching Band in the Greater Cleveland area. The community really pulled together to make it happen, and that is an amazing testament to how deeply Falls Pride truly runs. I also would like to recognize County Council President John Schmidt. John, your service to our community spans many years, and we are proud to have you as a voice for us on County Council. Thank you all for making this region stronger through your willingness to work together.

When speaking of leadership, it is important to me that I mention the dedication and support of our Cuyahoga Falls City Councilmembers, some who are with us today. At-large Councilman Paul Colavecchio, At-Large Councilman Jeff Iula, Ward 4 Councilwoman Mary Nichols-Rhodes, and Ward 8 Councilman Russ Iona. We find ourselves at an exciting time with incredible momentum and potential, as we move forward with development projects that will not only change the aesthetics of our downtown, but jumpstart opportunities for economic growth. We know we cannot make this happen without you, and I am thankful for your commitment to moving the city forward.

I also want to recognize my senior cabinet members: Law Director Russ Balthis, Finance Director Bryan Hoffman, and Development Director Diane Sheridan. A few weeks ago, I announced Anthony Zumbo as our new Service Director, and I am honored to have him and his wealth of knowledge and experience on board. I have an immense amount of gratitude for them and all of our city employees who show up to work every day, to improve the quality of life for our residents, business owners, and visitors. Our city sees continual growth and improvement because of their efforts, which is one of the many reasons we use the slogan “Life is Better Here” in Cuyahoga Falls. Thank you for all that you do.

I will begin today by briefly providing an overview of our city finances. The 2016 General Fund ending unencumbered balance was \$8.46 million and the cash balance is \$8.71 million. I’m pleased to announce that at the end of 2016, our cash balance has increased by \$1,042,088 since my administration took office at the beginning of 2014. Similar to a personal savings account, our cash balance, or “Rainy Day Fund” is the city’s savings and provides a cushion during economic downturns. Our target with Moody’s Rating Agency is to have a balance of 20% of yearly revenues; ours is right around 27 percent.

Through labor negotiation processes, led by Law Director Russ Balthis, we were able to provide reasonable wage increases to bargaining and non-bargaining employees, and as a result, employees make contributions to their healthcare costs, receive a wellness benefit, and participate in a health care committee. These programs invest in healthy employees, while providing cost-savings to the city. Last summer, we were honored to present at The Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service Conference to talk about our successful bargaining techniques here in The City of Cuyahoga Falls.

I’m pleased to report that in October, Moody’s Investors Service released a rating report that again confirmed the City of Cuyahoga Falls’ Aa2 rating. The report highlighted the city’s “healthy financial position supported by strong management and conservative budget assumptions, and positive operating results.” The Moody’s rating report confirmed not only our strong bond rating but also the talent and strength of our management team in our Finance Department led by Finance Director Bryan Hoffman.

We also received The Certificate of Achievement, which is the highest form of recognition in the area of governmental accounting and financial reporting. And not surprisingly, we were recently informed that the Ohio Auditor of State released their Financial Health Indicators Report that rated Cuyahoga Falls with a Positive Outlook in all 17 out of 17 categories that measure the

financial health of the city. Only 8 percent of all cities in Ohio received the perfect positive outlook score that we received.

Infrastructure remains one of our top priorities. In both 2015 and 2016, the paving budget was increased from \$1.5 million to \$2 million, which increased the number of road miles that were improved from 11.9 in 2014, to over 22 lane miles in 2016.

Additionally, our Engineering Department, led by our City Engineer Tony Demasi, completed the Chart Road Woodward Creek Culvert project that will help alleviate flooding in the area, and installed a new sanitary sewer along Cochran Road to help spur economic development. We were also successful in establishing a quiet zone at the Broad Boulevard/CSX railroad crossing, much to the delight of residents and businesses in the surrounding neighborhood.

Though there were exciting projects that came to fruition last year, 2016 did not happen without some challenges. Last June, we converted the Utility Billing component of a software system that had been purchased in 2011, to improve technological capabilities and data security measures. Once the system conversion was complete, there were various technological issues that occurred. To identify the issues, Utility Billing staff members began to manually review the individual accounts to identify and rectify the problems, which caused delays.

It is important to note that not all accounts were affected by the system conversion, and not all of the billing cycles encountered the same transition issues. As issues were identified, steps were immediately put into place to address customer questions and concerns, to verify meter and system accuracy, and to ensure transparency in the process. Staff members were cross-trained and reassigned to assist residents with any questions or concerns regarding their utility bills. Late fees and utility terminations were suspended, and additional time was granted to make payments on bills. To assure our customers that their meters were reading accurately, the city retained a certified meter testing vendor to verify that the meters were reading and transmitting accurately.

Further, I requested that the Summit County Internal Audit Department perform a full assessment of the electric billing and control environment and released the findings publicly to ensure full transparency in the process. Finally, we retained an independent organization to assess the policies and procedures in Utility Billing, to assess the operations, and to evaluate if we were utilizing best practices; and to make recommendations if we were not. We took all of these measures not only to address the issues at hand, but also to make sure that this sort of conversion problem never happens again as we move forward. I commend Information Services Director John Konich, and Deputy Service Director Teresa Hazlett, for working tirelessly to get our service levels back to where we all expect them to be.

Regarding safety, our police and fire departments, led by Police Chief Jack Davis and Fire Chief Paul Moledor, continue to provide our citizens with unmatched safety services. Category one crimes were down 5 percent from 2015. Those crimes include activities such as assault, burglary, and arson. Our firefighters continue to provide exceptional response times for fire, rescue, and EMS calls all while offering the utmost professionalism and care.

A major incident occurred in July of 2016 that was a stark reminder of the dangers that our safety professionals face every day that they work to protect us. After threats against police officers had been called into our dispatch center, Officer Ted Davis was struck head-on by a suspect in his police cruiser on Broad Blvd. and suffered extensive injuries. As I sat in the hospital with his family at 3 a.m. that night, I realized how life can change in the blink of an eye. Ted had to undergo multiple surgeries and extensive rehabilitation, but remained steadfast in his drive and determination to return to work by the end of the year. My Administration, the Police Department, and Officer Davis' family, are extremely grateful for the outpouring of support from the community that was shown during that time. Just as he had promised, Officer Davis was able to return to full duty before the end of the year, and we remain in awe of his courage and strength. We are grateful to have him back.

The Opiate epidemic continues to weigh on our community, and our safety forces are working to educate our students about the dangers of drug abuse through the "Not Me I'm Drug Free" program in the elementary schools. They have hosted assemblies in our middle and high schools and provide education to parents at mandatory meetings. Our narcotics detectives continue to investigate overdoses to track the source of the drugs and are targeting the drug dealers. We will remain focused on using every available means, to continue to fight against this issue.

We remain pioneers in the fight against the opiate epidemic and we are working hard to save lives. Our officers were the first police department in Summit County to carry the life-saving opiate-reversing drug Narcan. I am proud that we are also the first city in Summit County to provide our residents with resources and support through the Quick Response Team. This effort is a collaboration with the Summit County ADM Board, Oriana House, and our own Police and Fire personnel.

We have been working hard to identify those in our community that have addictions, we know who they are, and we are going right to their homes to offer resources to get them into proper treatment as soon as possible. If the team is unable to make contact with the resident at home, they will leave a note with contact and resource information with the promise of a follow-up visit. The Quick Response Team is visiting homes each week to equip individuals and families with information and resources that can help reduce instances of overdoses and death. Neighbors can rest assured that we remain committed to combatting the opiate addiction in our neighborhoods and will not turn a blind eye to this health crisis. I want to thank ADM Board Executive Director Jerry Craig, for his unwavering commitment to this community.

Last year, through a series of meetings in neighborhoods throughout the city, I announced our new Neighborhood Excellence Initiative. The goal of the Neighborhood Excellence Initiative is to inspire citizen engagement, and to connect residents and businesses with services and activities designed to reinforce strong, safe and vibrant neighborhoods. Part of the Neighborhood Excellence Initiative is a call to action, asking for residents to be Neighborhood Ambassadors. The Ambassadors serve as a local point-person in their respective neighborhoods, to work with city leaders to help identify issues and help inform neighbors about beneficial services and programs that are provided by the city. The Initiative provides an opportunity for community

members to get involved and make an impact on their neighborhoods. If you would like to be a Neighborhood Ambassador, please visit our city website or contact my office.

Recently, I welcomed the third Mayor's Youth Advisory Council to the city. The Youth Advisory Council is a unique collaboration between my office and our future leaders of Cuyahoga Falls. The purpose of the program is to encourage students to become active participants in their local government and community, by working with city leaders to address issues that directly affect young people in the city. I am pleased to have 12 students from our area high schools participating in this year's council. We set out to teach them about how local government works and how they can get more involved, but each year I have learned more from the students about what matters most and how we can be better involved with them. I have become a better Mayor because of their insight, and I am thankful for their participation.

Last year was an outstanding year for our Parks and Recreation Department led by Superintendent Ed Stewart. City playgrounds and parks saw major improvements with much more planned for 2017. I am pleased to inform you that Water Works Family Aquatics Center had record days of attendance and revenues given the record breaking heat of last summer. The same was true for Brookledge Golf Club since the unseasonably warm weather lasted long into the fall months. Our facilities continue to outperform area competitors, and are invaluable recreational assets to our community.

We opened a new boat launch at River Front Park through a grant from the Ohio Department of Natural Resources. We put the site in to provide kayakers with a place to enter the river to begin their journey through our renowned Class V rapids, but also to provide beginners a place to exit to avoid the more challenging waters. This phenomenal access point is another valuable tool that will aid us in putting Cuyahoga Falls on the map as a tourist destination for kayakers across the country. The closest rapids of this caliber are as far away as West Virginia. We have something incredibly special here, right in our downtown! Whitewater kayakers will again test their paddling skills this year as they compete in the 2nd Annual Cuyahoga Falls Kayak Race. We are proud to host this event on April 22 and promise that it is an event that you won't want to miss.

At the last State of the City, I announced the unveiling of our redesigned city website. We are now able to showcase the beauty of our community, our wide variety of amenities and activities we have to offer, and the vast amount of city services that are available to our residents and businesses. It outlines everything our residents and visitors need to know about why life is better here in an organized and accessible manner. It is something we can all be proud of.

After the city website had been revamped, I contacted TRIAD Communications President and CEO Rick Krochka, to talk about the best way that the city could engage the community in defining our city. Discussions began regarding a city logo and how to incorporate both Cuyahoga Falls and Woodridge High School students in the process. Rick volunteered to facilitate an effort with his staff so that students could receive professional guidance and mentoring throughout a logo design project. Five students were chosen by their teachers to participate. The students conducted a focus group for residents so that they could learn about what Cuyahoga Falls means to members of the community. The students took the information from the brainstorming session

back to their respective schools, while working closely with their professional mentors to develop their designs. Beyond mentoring the students through the design process, the team at TRIAD also worked with the students to help strengthen their presentation and public speaking skills. A panel of local business professionals then listened to presentations from the student artists and their mentors, as they detailed the creative process that resulted in their individual artistic designs. After the presentation of the eight logos, the panel discussed the renderings and picked the top 3 student designs. The top three logos were released to the public for a city-wide vote so that every single resident had the opportunity to choose the permanent city logo. The residents voted for the design created by Woodridge High School student Clare Willett.

The chosen logo is much more than a piece of art; it is a symbol of heritage, community involvement, and sense of place in the City of Cuyahoga Falls. This was a unique collaboration throughout the community, and I want to thank everyone who played a part in it.

The logo project not only brought a wide range of community partners together, but it also gave us a chance to highlight the artistic talent that exists within the community. It made me wonder what more we could do to promote the arts in our city. With that, we began a new partnership with both Western Reserve Hospital and the Cuyahoga Valley Art Center to bring artwork to City Hall. A few weeks ago, I unveiled the first art installation entitled “Home Is Where The Art Is.” Through the generosity of Western Reserve Hospital, works that were created by residents of the city are now on display for community viewing. The current selection of images is a sampling of artwork by distinguished artists from Cuyahoga Falls that was produced from 1937-2008. The artwork is on loan to the city from the Cuyahoga Valley Art Center and is currently hung in City Hall along the south hallway. Additional works are on display in my office and one of our conference rooms. Artwork will periodically be rotated out of City Hall and replaced with new works so that the community may continue to enjoy art, free of charge. The collection has breathed new life into our building, and I am proud of this partnership.

I'd like to thank Dr. Robert Kent and the physician leaders of Western Reserve Hospital for their commitment to Cuyahoga Falls. We are fortunate to have a hospital in our city that is owned and managed by physicians, who have invested in ensuring our residents have easy and convenient access to award winning, high quality, high satisfaction health care. Dr. Kent and his team have continually stayed loyal to the City and the residents, and we all benefit from the strong ties we have with the doctors and their organization. We look forward to even more growth and success with Western Reserve under the leadership of our friend Dr. Kent. I am honored to announce that Western Reserve Hospital has also volunteered to be the presenting sponsor of our new Friday night entertainment series that will be held this summer on the riverfront.

I want to commend Getta Kutuchief, Samantha Coldwell, and their team of community volunteers for the phenomenal success of our Cuyahoga Falls Better Block event. A great amount of survey work was conducted during and after the event, that revealed that residents overwhelmingly want family friendly events and activities on the riverfront, that focus on local retail and food vendors, with an eclectic array of entertainment. We took that collected information and are now going to put it into action. So, in addition to our Festa Italiana, Irishfest, and Oktoberfest festivals, we will also be featuring a Kids Fest, a First Responders' Appreciation

event, a Taste of the Falls featuring local eateries and local breweries, and a new event called BeBop on the Block, a jazz and craft cocktail event that will look and feel much like Better Block. We are also thrilled to welcome back the co-chairs and many of the committee members from Better Block who are volunteering together with our city staff members, to bring the riverfront to life on Fridays nights. We are excited about this new venture and look forward to seeing you at these amazing events this summer.

From an economic development standpoint, Portage Crossings continues to perform well financially, and expansion is ongoing. Redevelopment and revitalization ventures continue along South Front Street and plans to open the Front Street pedestrian mall to vehicular traffic are well underway. This is due in large part to Development Director Diane Sheridan and the efforts of her Community Development team.

Developer Stark Enterprises announced plans for its new 9,700-square-foot retail project, Portage North, which broke ground in November and is located near the southeast corner of Graham and State Roads. We are thrilled with Stark Enterprises continued investment and commitment here in the City of Cuyahoga Falls. Since their grand opening in 2014, the development has been thriving, and we are proud of the jobs, economic growth and expansion the area has seen over the past three years. Portage North is scheduled to open later this year.

Back in December, Thomas O'Neil, Real Estate Acquisitions for Menards, spoke to Cuyahoga Falls City Council to update them on the Menards project, and stated that construction of Menards is expected to begin sometime in 2017 with completion in 2018. We are excited they have stated that they will be moving construction efforts forward this year, and commend their ongoing commitment to bringing new business, creating new jobs, and making this investment in the City of Cuyahoga Falls.

The redevelopment of South Front Street continues and is completely revamping the aesthetics of the area. Craft Beer Bar, The Office, Staffinders, Pandora Cupcakes, Hibachi, TRIAD Communications, and the new HiHo Brewing Company are doing well in their respective locations and have restored economic viability along that corridor. Additionally, the City of Cuyahoga Falls and TRIAD Communications were proud to receive a Preservation Merit Award from the State Historic Preservation Office of the Ohio History Connection for the rehabilitation of the Falls Stamping and Welding Building, now known as The Foundry. The project highlights the importance of strong private and public partnerships for Economic Development initiatives.

We continue to move forward with plans to open the Front Street Pedestrian Mall to vehicular traffic. Studies were conducted early in the process that included valuable information on how to achieve a more multi-modal, pedestrian-friendly area. City leaders have worked diligently to make well-calculated and well-researched investments. In conjunction, a housing and retail market study was completed to identify retail market capability for downtown. The study found that residents are leaving Cuyahoga Falls to shop elsewhere but would like to shop closer to home. The retail analysis revealed that the area could support roughly 215,000 square feet of retail space. Further, by doing nothing, Cuyahoga Falls is losing over an estimated \$60 million in sales revenues to surrounding municipalities. On State Route 8, approximately 85,000 vehicles

drive through Cuyahoga Falls every day, and we are, quite literally, letting the potential for business pass us by. An engineering study was commissioned to evaluate the existing fountains, clock tower, and structural integrity of the parking decks. Various community meetings were conducted, and we continue to garner public input regarding the future redevelopment of downtown. Many hundreds of hours have gone into the research and planning. We are not taking this decision lightly, and we are doing everything we can to ensure that we do it correctly.

The total project investment is estimated at \$13 million. Comparatively, the total project investment for the Portage Crossing Development was \$20 million and the Natatorium was \$27 million. The project will be funded by General Obligation Debt, and there will be no increase in taxes. The funds for repayment will be available through maturing debt. The largest Returns on Investment will be realized through increases in sales activity, property values, and job creation.

Last month, I embarked on an overnight fact-finding tour to help reimagine downtown Cuyahoga Falls with community and business leaders. Our group traveled to Oak Park, Illinois, and Valparaiso and South Bend, Indiana, to experience the successful revitalization of downtown areas that were once struggling for survival. During our visit to these cities, we were able to hear about what city and community leaders had learned through the rebuilding process, what they found were best practices, and how the redevelopment efforts have revived their local economies.

At the end of last month, I, along with city and industry leaders, held a community forum to discuss the Downtown Transformation Project. Roughly 250 residents attended the meeting that was held at the Cuyahoga Falls Natatorium. The conversation focused on proposed public improvements, retail recruitment, and branding efforts as the city works to reopen the existing pedestrian mall to two-way vehicular traffic to redevelop and revitalize downtown. Two consistent messages that were delivered by panel members were that, significant investments need to be made on Front Street because it is plagued by aging infrastructure, and that doing nothing is not an option. I am proud that so many residents and business leaders continue to show such a vested interest in our unique potential for economic growth along the riverfront. The video and power point slides from that public meeting can be found on our website.

The planning phase of the proposed hotel remains underway as property owners finalize operator and financing agreements. More information will be forthcoming as the project evolves.

Similarly, efforts to redevelop the Falls Theater are currently underway. We know that developers of both the Falls Theater and hotel have committed to redeveloping property on Front Street, and have done so on the condition, that the pedestrian mall is opened. We also know that the Ohio Historic Preservation Office stated that they would not recommend the area being placed on the National Register of Historic Places if the street is not opened.

Branding efforts have commenced as we begin to redefine our downtown. Residents and business owners are working with branding experts to describe what Cuyahoga Falls means to them, and what they envision for the future of the riverfront. This information will be used to tell the story that will market and promote our new downtown. We will continue to do our due diligence as this project advances to make sure that the resulting downtown is your downtown.

We are committed to the rebirth of our downtown to provide new economic opportunities for our City. We need to capitalize on the market share that exists because we are in the middle of a transportation hub, but that market share is currently unattainable due to a lack of investment, visibility, traffic, and on-street parking. With approval from City Council, road construction could commence in late spring of this year.

These are a few highlights that show my commitment to moving the city forward, and this is why life is better here.

Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedules to be here today to hear about the incredible projects that we are working on, here in the great City of Cuyahoga Falls. Thank you for your continued interest and investment in the growth and wellbeing of our city. And thank you for your unrelenting and humbling support that allows me the distinct honor and privilege of serving as your Mayor.

I am proud to tell you that our State of the City, is incredibly strong. Three years ago, I told you that there was a new day dawning in the City of Cuyahoga Falls, one with infinite possibilities for economic growth and positive change. Over the past three years, we have accomplished an extraordinary amount. We have incredible opportunities ahead, and it is clear that our momentum continues to build. Great progress is upon us, and together, as a community, we will succeed. As I've stated before, my goal is to have two groups of people, those who live in Cuyahoga Falls and those who wish that they did. Thank you.
