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The state of a rising city

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Chattanooga's mayors typically have not delivered State of the City addresses, but Mayor Bob Corker's address Wednesday sets a welcome precedent. He used the occasion to give valuable focus to the accelerating pace of the city's development and the goals he would like to achieve -- in collaboration with citizens and the progressive City Council -- in the next 36 months. That's a valuable exercise in accountability, communication and consensus building.

Beyond that, there's much good news in what Mr. Corker had to say. Most exciting is the plan to establish the 21st Century Waterfront Trust, a bold and imaginative way to integrate and finance the next major steps in development of the riverfront. There is a clear need for an integrated plan for that work -- outlined last week in the new riverfront plan -- if it is to occur systematically and efficiently. Given the scope of that visionary undertaking, and the ongoing costs of other city services, financing clearly requires a new approach. The method suggested by the mayor -- combining tourism-generated revenue from the new hotel-motel tax with private and public investment -- constitutes an excellent way to underwrite this vital work.

Few initiatives could produce more positive impact on the city's prospects for economic development and quality of life. Indeed, Mayor Corker believes implementation of the first four steps of the riverfront plan "would create a tidal wave of transformation and would change forever the face of Chattanooga, allowing us to finally claim our heritage as a river city."

His assessment is correct. Future development of the downtown's riverfront is the gateway to securing Chattanooga's growing reputation as a wonderful place to visit, live and work, to build a business, create jobs and rear a family.

Skeptics who would cast public investments in riverfront improvement and downtown infrastructure as a misplaced priority on tourism and menial jobs miss the larger point. Such investments improve valuable amenities and quality of life for citizens throughout the city, the county and the entire metro region. For the same reason that they attract tourism, they also appeal to local citizens, who find immense value in the amenities and aesthetic development of a rejuvenated downtown and the spiritually nurturing riverside parks.

An improving downtown also serves to attract wide national interest in the city among entrepreneurs and business people looking for agreeable places to locate new business. Taken together with equal emphasis on other spadework for business recruitment -- the Enterprise South industrial park, the MetroNet broadband initiative, creation of a venture capital pool, new community participation by UTC, and new focus on at-risk schools and neighborhood improvement -- they confirm the city's vitality and ascendancy.

Mr. Corker's address, to be sure, covered a range of other initiatives undertaken by his office and the council. Collectively, they give reason to feel good, even inspired,

about the city's progress; about the effort, thought and energy that Mr. Corker's administration has invested in its work; and about the rising level of commitment to improvement among citizens.

Mr. Corker's initiatives and goals include both the macro and micro. He cited a strong focus on neighborhood improvement and efforts to assist neighborhood associations; on housing, particularly the effort to create 750 new downtown residential units; on crime reduction; and on improvement in public services, including the introduction of a city call center to receive and track citizens' comments and action on complaints.

His list of goals and accomplishments included important work on broader fronts, as well. He plans to create an airline service task force to bolster air service. He correctly wants to insure that area businesses, and new business prospects, learn the immensely valuable potential of the city's designation as a federal **Renewal Community** Zone, which allows \$1,500 a year in tax credits for each employee who lives in the designated downtown area.

Mayor Corker wants to reinforce the city's focus on education, to ensure improved performance of the nine inner-city schools on the state's notice list, and to elevate and broaden UTC's role in the community.

Mr. Corker's address, to be sure, was not just about his and the City Council's agenda and accomplishments. He also emphasized how much he has learned from citizens, and the personal rewards of participating in government in a city where citizen interest and involvement, energy and commitment, make his job a privilege.

That's a perspective worth noting on all sides because cities, Chattanooga included, can only be as good as the people who get involved. They do not run on automatic pilot. They are organic entities that rise, or fall, on the level of energy, vision and commitment of the people who participate. Mayor Corker obviously is willing to do more than his share, and so are a lot of other people. As long as that remains so, the state of the city will be good.