

## **Chattanooga Times/Chattanooga Free Press**

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### **The future of the city Chattanooga poised to move ahead on range of issues**

Bob Corker

This past Wednesday, I had the privilege of delivering my first state of the city speech. It was a great opportunity to talk about the various roles citizens play in building a great city.

The speech focused in large part on the future of Chattanooga. I challenged our community and our administration to build on the strong foundation that has been laid, and continue the work of transforming Chattanooga into the model of the 21st-century city. In the speech, we announced the formation of the 21st Century Waterfront Trust which, when fully funded, will allow us to immediately transform our waterfront and forever change the face of our city. We also announced the creation of a task force that will look at innovative ways of attracting additional air service.

We will take full advantage of the benefits of the **Renewal Community** designation that Chattanooga recently received through the Bush administration to create new jobs. We described the new customer call center that will soon open in City Hall, giving every citizen equal access to city services and greatly improving their delivery. We announced that we will immediately begin implementing Phase I of our bike plan, which will be complete by this fall.

We spent a great deal of time laying out an aggressive agenda and focused much of our address on the future. In the coming months, you will hear more about each of these, but in this space, I want to provide a progress report on those things we committed to do when we came to office.

We were elected by the citizens of Chattanooga with a mandate to focus on putting in place those things that will bring new jobs to our city through a strong focus on economic development, enhancing our neighborhoods and improving our most distressed schools. To accomplish those things, we laid out a very specific agenda focused on the foundation we believed was crucial to continuing to build a great city. We have done those things we said we would do.

We said we would work with the Chamber of Commerce to bring on a full-time business recruiter of the highest level. That has been done, and Jay Garner now works on behalf of our citizens to create great jobs.

We said we would bring venture capital to Chattanooga. We recruited \$50 \$1.5 million to create the Chattanooga Opportunity Fund, specifically geared toward making loans to start-up and minority-owned businesses. Companies have been funded and jobs have been created as a result.

We said we would create a digital vision by taking full advantage of the vast fiber optic lines that exist in Chattanooga. In conjunction with the Electric Power Board, CoVista Communications and our technology community, we created MetroNet. MetroNet will allow us to provide companies in our central business district with

broadband access six times faster than anything currently available in Chattanooga - and at half the cost. This will allow us to compete for technology jobs with cities such as San Francisco, New York, Chicago and Atlanta.

We said we would work to develop the former VAAP site in a way that will bring the highest number of high-paying jobs possible to our city.

VAAP is now called Enterprise South Industrial Park, and working in partnership with the county, we have made great progress on the development of that site. Plans are to begin demolition work this summer and infrastructure installation this fall. When the site is fully developed, we believe it will be one of the 10 most important industrial sites in the country.

We said we would focus on improving air service in our community. We have recruited a major market CEO to our airport who is focused on how air service can be improved in Chattanooga. In addition, we continue to work with neighboring states to ensure that Chattanooga residents benefit appropriately from any potential new rail or air service.

We said we would work with the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga to assist it in realizing its full potential in our community. We have leveraged our relationship with Oak Ridge National Laboratory to connect UTC to a fiber optic network that is being developed among that facility, Atlanta and the Research Triangle in North Carolina.

This connection has the potential to transform the university's ability to conduct applied research and be far more relevant to our business community. We continue to work with them on any effort that enhances the university and expands its important role in our community.

We said we would focus on the recruitment and retention of high-performing teachers in nine urban high-priority elementary schools. We formed the Community Education Alliance, which is composed of 15 leading CEOs. Through the CEA, we have established an incentive plan for teachers who teach in these nine schools that includes significant bonus pay, and tremendous equity and low-interest loans for housing. Already, several high-performing teachers have answered the call and will be making a difference in these schools.

While still providing basic services to all our neighborhoods, we said we would focus the efforts of our Neighborhood Services Department on 15 key areas that had high crime rates, decreasing real estate values, absentee landlords and an abundance of code violations. The focused effort of our Strategic Neighborhood Initiative is yielding results.

We said we would work with the Chattanooga Neighborhood Association Council to identify key areas of concern in our neighborhoods. Working with CNAC and our Public Works Department, we created and implemented a policy that has caused our city to be cleaner than ever.

We said we would ask the police department to develop a plan that focused on making our neighborhoods safer. It was implemented, and over the past four months, crime rates have declined. We are working to ensure that trend continues.

And, we said we would do all of this while making City Hall more efficient. Through a great task force of business leaders and the cooperation of our city employees, we have worked to reduce the number of positions in city government by 200 without diminishing the number of uniformed positions.

We said what we would do and we did what we said.

As we move forward, we must build on the strong foundation our community has laid. Working with you and our outstanding City Council, we will add layer upon layer upon layer, engaging all of our citizens in building a great city.

Chattanooga is fully positioned to realize its true potential and to claim the rich heritage that is a reflection of the values and dreams of its citizens.

Bob Corker is mayor of Chattanooga.