



CITY OF RYE

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Rye City Council Meeting: January 6, 2010 – 8:00 pm

State of the City Address

Douglas French -- Mayor, City of Rye

Members of the City Council, City Manager, City Employees, Members of our Boards and Commissions, Members of the Media and Citizens of Rye

Good evening – It is our tradition at the first meeting of the year to have the Mayor present the “State of the City” address. It is a pleasure to be before you tonight.

Today, we begin a New Year and a new decade with a new council and a renewed sense of optimism. There is much to be proud of about our City:

- We share a rich heritage that ties our generations together
- We share a true sense of community where help thy neighbor is a reality
- And we share an opportunity -- an opportunity to make our City the leading community along the sound shore

But we will be tested. Just as you, your family and those around you have been tested by today’s economic times -- in 2010 our government will be tested.

Our government is defined by more than just the 7 volunteers on the Council, but it includes volunteer boards and commissions with over 100 volunteer commission members, and a paid professional City Management team – not to mention you, the Citizens of Rye.

As we have all seen, local governments everywhere are facing a paradigm shift. Voters have reached their absolute limit when it comes to taxes. Affordability is the central issue. When

that happens, it is time to get back to basics and rethink government. The primary role of local government is:

- the financial sustainability of our City
- the safety and well being of our citizens
- And the need to enhance our quality of life within the confines of good economics

In Rye, we will be faced with –

- anticipated revenue shortfalls
- structural state and county deficits
- 4 new labor agreements
- a transition to a new City Manager
- flood mitigation solutions
- The restructuring of our law dept.
- a fresh look at our litigation strategy
- capital investment demands
- A \$5M balloon payment on 1037 Boston Post Road
- environmental concerns
- And the need for immediate pedestrian safety infrastructure improvements.

How is Rye going to succeed?

Beginning today, we will deploy three governing philosophies that will be central in everything we do to give us the best chance for success:

1. **Establish clear lines of senior management accountability** – Under the direction of our City Manager, we have some of the best professional municipal talent in the County who are eager to lead and deliver the results we need.
2. **Empower our boards and commissions** – we also have the best and brightest private sector individuals who can provide the requisite skills and experience to think through the toughest problems we face and provide us with recommendations. Good leadership requires empowerment at this level. I am encouraging natural turnover on our boards

to attract new ideas and talent. Appointments will begin to take place at the meeting of January 20th.

3. **Encourage active public participation** – an informed and engaged public is fundamental to positive change so we need to provide as many forums and formats for Citizen input. Fact-based communication is critical.

Where are we going to focus?

More specifically, our priorities in the coming year are as follows:

Financial Management

Budgets are built on assumptions, and already the assumptions in our 2010 budget are starting to change with anticipated revenue shortfalls, state cuts and potential cost increases. We are an economically diverse community with moderate to high-income to fixed income to unemployed so we need to re-dedicate ourselves toward tax relief. As a result, I am calling on the City Manager and the Senior Management Department heads to begin planning for the 2011 budget today by identifying 5% in contingency savings.

In addition, we need an objective look at financial trends, their impact on us and measures we need to take. Therefore, tonight, we will begin with a review of our Finance Committee, its role and the role it needs to play in the future. I will ask Councilwoman Paula Gamache to continue her work on that committee.

Litigation Management

Starting today, we will incorporate additional controls on our case management. All legal and litigation activity will require cost estimates to be reviewed by Council prior and post legal activity. I have asked former Mayor John Carey and Councilman Joe Sack to make a recommendation to the Council on establishing a volunteer Litigation/Case Management Committee to act as an advisory panel on our legal process. I have also asked them to make a recommendation on the structure of our Law Department and our retainer agreements. We have just instituted Kristen Wilson as our Interim Corporation Counsel and we are very happy to have her – but at the same time we do not want to miss this opportunity to review our overall legal operation.

City Management

Frank Culross has expressed an interest to retire at some point in 2010 and he and I both agree that we cannot go into 2011 without our future City Manager. I have asked Frank to put together a recommended transition plan for the Council to review that will allow us ample time to identify and responsibly transition to our new City Manager. That process should begin at the end of Q1 and could take 3 to 6 months. I cannot properly express my enormous gratitude for his continued service and leadership to Rye. I also want to commend City Comptroller Jean Gribbins and Asst. City Manager Scott Pickup for their work during a difficult 2009.

Pedestrian Safety

This has been a common theme of mine, but one cannot go from Point A to Point B in Rye without taking on some level of safety risk whether by walking, jogging or biking. This has become a citizen-driven issue and government needs to respond in terms of enforcement and investment.

Cell phone, texting and speeding are just a few examples where as a community we need to say – enough. School Board President Josh Nathan and I have agreed to lead a joint organizational meeting with the City and School officials to frame out the issues and the implementation plans. Any work – which will include downtown -- will be conducted through sub-committees of the Traffic and Transportation Committee where I would like to add an active Police officer. I have asked Suzanna Keith to be a working member of that commission.

Flood Mitigation

Flooding in Rye is no longer a “Buyer Beware in Indian Village” problem. The emotional and financial price Rye continues to pay is too great. It impacts our downtown, our institutions and our infrastructure. Yet the experts and the community at-large continue to disagree not just on what – but if we should do anything. We need to move forward with one voice. I have asked Richard Filippi in concert with our City Planner, Planning Commission, Conservation Commission and Flood Action Committee to deliver a recommended plan summary by April 16th for the Council and Public to react to – 3 years to the day of the last flood.

Governmental Management

Albany, White Plains and now even Washington are impacting our lives more directly than they ever have before. Westchester County is projected to have a \$60M deficit next year. Multiply that by 300 and you start to get a look at the structural deficit of the state.

As a City, and not just the Council and City Management team, we need to be a lot more engaged with the surrounding municipalities to advocate change at the County and the state. We also need to better understand both the impacts of pending legislation and labor relations management as well as grant opportunities. Tonight I am calling for the creation of a new permanent Committee on government relations to work with the City Manager and Council. I will ask Councilman Peter Jovanovich to work on that Committee.

Downtown

One of the best assets we have and is the envy of surrounding communities is our Downtown. Yet those communities have made more progress than we have. We need to shift to a merchant-friendly downtown and accelerate and expand ideas like outdoor dining, 15-minute parking and programs that support our businesses as well as begin planning for a two-tiered parking structure. The demand for commuter, retail and restaurant parking is real. I have asked Councilwoman Parker to continue her work on the Rye Chamber of Commerce and explore putting together a business roundtable with the downtown landlords.

Other Key Initiatives

Will include:

- The Recreation commission to identify field space and field management solutions, cost containment and new revenue sources
- CCAC for environmental solutions to include the development of a sustainability plan
- And Rye Town Park where we are responsible for 50% of the operating budget, 40% of the capital expense, but only 33% of the voting authority. I have called on Rye Town Supervisor Joe Carvin to work with me on aligning that relationship.

Communication Management

But all of these initiatives and work are for naught if you, the public, are not kept up-to-date or do not have the opportunity to provide input and feedback. Tonight, I am calling on to expand our Cable committee to be a full media committee to include Internet, social media, e-mail, and other media. Our School District has been very good at keeping families informed through their listserv and the City should be equal to the task. Threats like burglaries and Coyotes require immediate heightened awareness, information and collaboration.

I am also instituting the Mayor's management report which will be an update from City Management to the Council at our Council meetings on the status of key projects to also be posted and updated regularly on the City site or pushed out to the public in the form of an information release.

Finally, your comments, issues and grievances. Residents can continue to be heard during that portion of the council meeting, but we will limit it to 5 minutes each. We will add more time later in the agenda or add an alternative time at City Hall as well as a City-wide survey, town Halls, and a feedback link on our site.

So why is Rye going to succeed?

Because these are not my ideas, they are yours. This is what you told us *you* wanted. You have clearly spoken. We have many new families and their voices have been heard.

In Rye, we have the people, the know-how and the willingness to make things happen. Now more than ever, we are in this together -- once the debate is over, we need to pull together. We look forward to 2010, ready to work with you and ready to serve you. Thank you.