

**Thank you. And thank you, Randy, for making up all those nice things about me. I expect to hear them at the top of the hour, every hour today.**

**Before we get started, I'd also like to thank the Rotary Club for inviting me here to speak, and I'd like to thank all of you for coming out.**

**This is the third year in a row I've stood before this crowd to discuss the state of our city. And, for the third straight year, I'm proud to say that the state of our city is strong. It is stronger than it was when we spoke last year; it is stronger than it was when I took office in 2004.**

**As a city, we have made tremendous strides. We have balanced a broken checkbook; we have rebuilt our riverfront; we have improved our business standing; and we have become an All-America city.**

**Our work is paying off. And here's just one example. Economists say Indiana ranked a dismal forty fifth in the nation for job growth in 2005. Last year, the state gained just**

**10,000 jobs. But here's something to think about...almost a quarter of those jobs – 2,300, to be exact – were created right here in the Evansville area. That made us, by far, the most successful Indiana city – even more successful than the Indianapolis area, which grew by only 1400 jobs.**

**We are a strong city, but that doesn't mean we can rest easy. I have a vision for our city. When I look into the future, I see an Evansville with a thriving Downtown and a flourishing business community. I see an Evansville that educates and provides good paying jobs for its children. I see an Evansville with safe, revitalized neighborhoods. And, I see an Evansville with a highway that actually connects us to the rest of the state.**

**Let's take a trip to that place...the Evansville of the future, the Evansville that I see. Let's start with the Downtown.**

**Many of you in this room come Downtown everyday, but for this trip you may still have to use your imaginations. Your trip to the Evansville of the future starts along the**

**Lloyd Expressway, where you take a new exit ramp at Fulton Avenue – our gateway into Downtown. We persuaded Congress to give the state money specifically for the new interchange and they finished it in 2008. It replaces the difficult, dangerous intersection we all know. Instead of that logjam, you now can simply pull off the exit, and let it take you straight to Fulton.**

**It's easy now to head into Downtown Evansville. The first thing you'll notice on your trip isn't the current group of businesses, but the trailhead for our beautiful, scenic Greenway. It's filled with joggers, bikers, couples and families strolling together along the riverfront. Some of them may have walked from Kids' Kingdom or the LST 325, or maybe one of the other new family attractions we've built. Some of them may be walking to the next stop on your trip...the Casino Aztar Entertainment District.**

**Picture this...you drive by in the evening – or, especially, on a weekend – and you can see the crowds that have come Downtown, parked their cars, and walked into the \$40**

**million development. Some are headed to the boutique hotel, where they will kick back in the ultra-lounge, have a drink, and relax.**

**Others are on their way to hear live music or enjoy the atmosphere at Ri-Ra's Irish Pub, or to Jillian's Billiards Club, where they can enjoy everything from bowling and billiards to video games and sporting events.**

**And now, as you drive past the Aztar hotel and riverboat casino, you have a beautiful view of the glistening Ohio River. This is the view, you realize, that so many of our corporate citizens get every single day.**

**Because now, on your left, tower the headquarters of those corporations that have chosen to make Evansville their home. The buildings house Vectren, Old National, and American General Finance. They stand along with Bowen Engineering, Evansville Commerce Bank, and the other corporations we've attracted to our new, revitalized Downtown. As they tower over Evansville's riverfront, these majestic headquarters symbolize the long, lasting commitment our**

**corporate citizens have made to the Evansville community.**

**Leaving these behind, you try something that, at the beginning of 2006, would have seemed completely crazy -- you take a left turn from Riverside, into the heart of the Downtown, where you see...lo and behold...signs telling you where to find all the area's major destinations. You may ask -  
- How did this happen?**

**Well, our Downtown Implementation Committee did the work. Members dusted off the downtown master plans, and put many of their common sense recommendations in place. Along with the spiffy new signs, the committee helped design street changes and eliminated one way streets to make it easier to navigate the Downtown.**

**So now, you can easily find your way anywhere Downtown. Maybe on this trip to the Evansville of the future, you're coming home. You live downtown... in one of our newly renovated buildings. You pull your car into the underground parking space below**

**the old J.C. Penney building. You live there in one of the 23 Renaissance on Main condominiums. Or, maybe you have a parking spot in front of your new loft apartment, or near one of the other major new housing opportunities we can already see on the horizon.**

**Perhaps on another trip downtown, you simply want to park and take a stroll along the Pigeon Creek Greenway. Or, you want to visit the Children's Museum, the African-American Museum, or the LST 325. Maybe you just want to sample a new restaurant, or visit a new shop. There are lots of choices of things to do now. That's because all of the new businesses and people living downtown have sparked even more growth.**

**In my vision, Evansville's Downtown is the living, breathing, thriving heart of our city, where people come from all around to work, to eat, to shop, to live, and to play. Already, Downtown is home to some of the things I've described; a few others are coming soon. But the wheels are now in motion for all of it.**

**My vision for Evansville also includes things you won't see on your trip Downtown, but they are just as important.**

**One of those is education, where our Evansville Education Roundtable has set lots of goals and priorities for our city's students.**

**This summer, researchers hope to have more precise statistics about high school graduation rates here in Indiana. They believe that high school graduation rates are far worse than currently stated, that maybe 28 percent of all Hoosier teens drop out of high school and do not graduate.**

**Think about it, right now, one out of every four future workers in our state will not earn a high school education. Ladies and gentlemen, in this world, you know that is unacceptable.**

**Every day, advances in technology and an expanding globalized economy are increasing the demand for skilled labor. Consequently, a high school education is increasingly becoming the *minimum* requirement for entering the labor force. So**

**every day, completing high school becomes more and more essential.**

**That is why our Evansville Education Roundtable has made increasing Evansville's high school graduation rate one of its top priorities. It has set a target graduation rate of 100 percent. We want all of our kids to graduate from high school.**

**I realize this is both a lofty and an unlikely goal. But we want to raise the bar for young people in our community; we want them to understand that this is the *absolute* minimum standard they should strive toward, and that this community *expects* them to graduate from high school.**

**The Roundtable is working on a campaign to enforce this expectation in the community. One way to do this is to enhance community involvement in education. We are looking both to create programs that foster involvement, and to increase participation. Programs like Mentor Evansville are essential to our students. Parents and community leaders need to be involved in this process, to act as role models, and to**

**show our students the possibilities that come from education.**

**And then, we need to encourage every student to take their education even further, by taking advantage of the post-secondary options available to them – including the three extraordinary local institutions. Statistics show that, over a working career, college graduates earn almost 75 percent more than those with only a high school diploma. And along with those bigger paychecks come benefits to the community – benefits like lower unemployment rates, higher wages, and more tax revenue.**

**Unfortunately, the percentage of students attending college is dropping nationwide. But Evansville doesn't have to be part of this problem. In fact, we have already started working on this with a group of experts.**

**Recently, our Education Roundtable met with a representative of the National College Access Network. The Network offers college preparation counseling for students....they teach everything from filling out financial aid**

**forms to taking the SAT, and everything in between.**

**At that meeting, we asked the organization to conduct an analysis in Evansville, to help us determine what programs are available to promote college access, and what else we need to do.**

**The National College Access Network is doing this analysis for free. But keep in mind, if we choose to set up college access programs here in Vanderburgh County, it will be up to us to fund them. But doing that will help us reach our goal of creating opportunities for all young people especially those from low-income families or from families that have never sent anyone to college.**

**I believe it is our community's responsibility to help its residents reach their full potential – not just in education, but in all areas. And it's our responsibility to help improve their quality of life.**

**The city has not always been so good about taking care of its residents - especially when**

**it comes to municipal services. I am proud to say we've improved access to the basic utilities and services a city government is supposed to provide.**

**When I took office two years ago, the city of Evansville had entire neighborhoods that could not connect to the city's water service. Other neighborhoods had flooding problems; any time we received serious rainfall, their streets would flood, or – worse yet – their yards and homes would fill with backed-up sewage. In a city of our size and stature, that is completely unacceptable.**

**So, in the last two years, we have committed ourselves to addressing those problems. We put together a committee of public servants and residents to make a recommendation on fixing the Southeast Side flooding problems, and they did so. Now, I'm proud to say we are acting on their recommendations and will start construction this summer. It will fix the problem so these people won't have to live in fear every time they hear raindrops on their roof.**

**As for the city residents who couldn't use city water? We're working on that as well, and I can now definitively say that city water will be available to every neighborhood in Evansville by the end of my first term.**

**I believe we have a responsibility to each person who lives in our city – to take care of these basic needs. But I also believe we have a responsibility to our neighborhoods as a whole – a responsibility we are addressing through our Front Door Pride program.**

**Working with the near-Downtown community and its neighborhood organizations, we have identified homes that need rehabilitation, demolition, or mothballing. Already, we have acquired 120 of these properties. Many are vacant and neglected. Now, we will work with developers to either rehabilitate these homes, or demolish them and build new homes on the land.**

**The money for these projects will come from a \$1 million grant from the state. Local financial institutions are chipping in another \$2 million. That should handle construction**

**of at least 40 new homes. In addition, for homes that need to be rehabbed, we will be giving those properties away for a dollar to those developers who qualify.**

**How will this improve the neighborhood? We hope that the new and improved homes will inspire folks who live around them to fix up their own properties. We hope they'll develop an attitude where they will aspire to "keep up with the Jones's", in a good way.**

**As for the new homeowners...we are working with several faith-based organizations and our local banks to help low- and moderate-income families get loans.**

**These are the kinds of basic things a community should provide for all its residents. But we also need to provide the extras, as well – the little things that make people decide they want to stay in Evansville, instead of leaving for another, bigger city.**

**Perhaps the greatest example of this – and the one that so many of us have heard complaints about – is entertainment. There**

**is no question that Evansville has many family-friendly entertainment options, attractions like LST 325, a living tribute to our service men and women, the new interactive Children’s Museum, and the African-American Museum, showcasing the significant contributions of African-Americans to our community. And, the Casino Aztar Entertainment District Project is aimed at kick-starting the River City night life.**

**But for years, most of the largest entertainment draws – particularly those that have come in from out-of-town – have come to Roberts Stadium. The facility has served us well for 50 years, but now it is getting old and requires a substantial overhaul. We saw that this past year when the stadium flooded forcing us to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to fix the problem. And, compared to similar venues in other cities, Roberts is becoming increasingly outdated.**

**So, we’re asking the people of Evansville to make a choice. Should we spend the money to renovate Roberts Stadium – to fix the structural problems, and upgrade it to**

**compete with larger, newer venues? Or is it time to build a new, state-of-the-art facility somewhere in Evansville?**

**As you are probably aware, we've held public forums on the issue and my feeling is that people are very open-minded about the decision before us. The next public hearing will take place in April at the stadium. SMG will take folks on a tour of the facility, and point out some of the challenges with it. And, of course, you're all invited.**

**But we are not going to rely solely on SMG's analysis of the situation to determine what needs to be done. In the next several weeks, we will hire a consultant to look at the whole picture surrounding Roberts Stadium. It will be that consultant's job to look at our city – to find out what types of shows, events, and other attractions the people of Evansville want, and will support. Then, they will take that information and determine how much it would cost to renovate and modernize Roberts Stadium or build a new facility so that we can attract those events and meet our city's needs.**

**They will present that information to the public. And, they will suggest ways we could pay for upgrades or a new facility. We want the public to have all the facts before making a decision.**

**And speaking of decisions, there is one coming from the legislature – or, at least, I hope it's coming – that has a heavy bearing on Evansville's future. In my vision, our future Evansville is connected to the rest of the state by I-69.**

**I don't need to tell anyone here how important this highway is for southwestern Indiana. Right now, Evansville is so disconnected from the rest of the state – and Indianapolis in particular – that the folks up north often call us an extension of Kentucky. And, while they may be joking when they say that, I don't find it funny when they make laws and divvy out funding as if we were, in fact, on the other side of the river.**

**That is just one of the many reasons we need I-69. We need easier access to Indianapolis and the rest of the state. It will help us attract new businesses and help existing**

**businesses expand. And frankly, it will be a heck of a lot more convenient.**

**This is a project long overdue ... yet still, as I stand here speaking to you, politicians are dragging their feet up in Indianapolis, arguing about funding.**

**It's time for them to stop fighting. I don't care if it is a Democratic plan or a Republican plan; I don't care if it comes from the governor, the legislature, or even my fairy godmother. We need I-69.**

**Our General Assembly needs to approve a plan now – in *this* session – to finance I-69, so it can move forward and become a reality. Because, frankly, we've already waited far too long.**

**And while we can't control what's going on in Indianapolis, we can control what's happening here. We need to be ready for the explosion that will accompany I-69. That's why we've already started planning for I-69, by working with our neighboring communities in Warrick, Posey and Gibson**

**counties to create the Regional Economic Development Task Force.**

**The task force is working to create an economic development plan and organization that will carry our entire region into the future. To help facilitate that goal, we're even taking our local process a step further, by bringing all of our economic development agencies – the Chamber, the small business incubator, our Certified Technology Park, and USI's Center for Applied Research –under one roof.**

**Of course, it's easy to talk about all of this – the planning, the development, and the overall vision of our future Evansville. But it's a bit harder to find the money to pay for them.**

**We've been fortunate in this community to house many, many wonderful corporate citizens, whose presence has been a boon to the residents of Evansville. For example, take Vectren and Old National Bank who recently offered to chip in for a new arena Downtown. Or, the many local businesses and individuals who have helped raise funds**

**for the new children's museum and other local projects.**

**These folks have helped keep Evansville moving forward in some tough times. And we're lucky...we've been able to use Aztar lease payments for projects like the African American Museum, the loft grant program, and the Renaissance on Main project.**

**But when it comes to funding, we still need help, because our state legislature is making things more difficult every year. Our city runs efficiently, but we still struggle.**

**Looking ahead to 2007, it will cost us almost \$6.4 million more just to cover salaries, health care benefits and pension obligations for our retirees.**

**That's a \$6.4 million increase without giving another penny to any programs, projects, or city departments. At the same time, the state is telling us we can only bring in an estimated \$2 million in revenue.**

**We have real challenges. We've already cut our costs significantly and kept a tight control on city spending.**

**In the past two years, we've reduced top brass at both the police and fire department and put more officers out on the street. We have cut employees and reduced employee overtime. We've re-negotiated our contract with SMG, and have reduced our costs by bringing the Swonder Ice Arena management back in-house. We've re-designed our employee health care plan, taken a planned North Side Wastewater Treatment Plant off the books, and – at this very moment – we are auditing our water and sewer utility providers for cost efficiency.**

**Those things helped get us through the past few years' budget crunches. And they'll help this next year, but they won't be enough to close the gap.**

**We will go about these financial challenges the same way we have tackled every major challenge in this administration: By working with our city departments, local businesses, and the residents of our great city. Together,**

**I have every confidence we can meet this challenge.**

**After all, this past November, we showed what we can do when faced with a challenge.**

**The tornado that struck in the early hours of November 6 was horrific. Twenty-four people died; hundreds were injured; and even more lost their homes.**

**But in the midst of this tragedy, the people of Evansville once again showed their strength.**

**The moment that tornado hit, this community, we, went to work. And for the next few hours, strangers helped each other out of the rubble. Neighbors consoled neighbors. And our emergency crews performed flawlessly.**

**And the rest of us, who were watching it all unfold, well, we didn't wait to be asked. We gave our time, we gave our money, and we gave our belongings. In fact, we are still giving.**

**The television and radio stations held a telethon, and all of us, the folks who live and work around here, donated more than \$1.25 million dollars to the relief effort. That is incredible.**

**The hard work and cooperation shown in our rescue efforts were inspiring – even to the federal workers who came to our aid. FEMA representatives on the scene cited us as the model of how a community should respond to such a disaster.**

**That makes me proud, very proud. I'm proud to live here; I am proud to raise my family here; and I'm proud to be your mayor. We should all be proud.**

**Can we improve upon things? Absolutely, we can build a better downtown, open up educational opportunities, create more jobs and improve the quality of life for all of the people who live here. But, the one thing we don't have to improve upon...is our community's heart.**

**And, when I stand here and tell you that the state of the city is strong, you should not**

**doubt it, because we now know it is only a reflection of the people who live and work here.**

**Thank you.**