



# **2010 State of the City Of North Tonawanda**

Delivered by Mayor Robert G. Ort  
February 23, 2010

Distinguished guests, fellow citizens, I stand before you not simply to deliver just the state of the City today, but the state of our City moving forward. I say our City because at this moment we are faced with many challenges, more than perhaps at any in our long and proud history. In the face of such challenges we must remember that they are not faced by one man or a select group of individuals, but by each resident. The path forward must not be traveled alone, but by us all.

I do not have a monopoly on good ideas, nor does any one person. In the coming weeks, months and years, I will look to you, City workers, department heads, fellow elected leaders, and everyday citizens and taxpayers to assist me in building the North Tonawanda of the future, while at the same time doing our best to ensure that the values, and sense of community that have come to define our City endure for generations to come.

As we look ahead to 2011, we must re-evaluate the role of City government and what we as taxpayers are willing to pay for, and what we are not. If we want to get costs under control, we must control our spending. Every family and business in North Tonawanda has had to reduce their spending to survive the recent economic downturn. They have had to decide which bill to pay, which employee to let go. In a democratic society where we pride ourselves on self-government, our government can no longer afford to operate apart from the rest of our citizenry. We have a duty and an obligation to operate responsibly, and we should lead by example not with a “do as I say, not as I do”

mentality. That is what I believe I was elected to do, and that is what I intend to deliver. I am proposing a cap on all spending at 2009 levels for the 2011 budget. Last year, when I was campaigning for Mayor, one thing that I heard from almost all of our residents was that in the middle of the worst economic downturn since the great depression, the City was raising assessments. Many of our residents felt that this was nothing more than back door tax increase at a time when our working families and businesses are over taxed already. Now I want to be very clear: Our Assessor and her staff have a very difficult job and they are very good at what they do. I spoke with many of those same residents and many told me that they were treated with courtesy and respect. However my job is to ease the tax burden on our residents wherever possible. That is why I am proposing a moratorium on reassessments for three years. In that time I want the members of the Common Council to review the tri-annual assessment process and make sure that it is the best process for our taxpayers.

The City has recently begun to look into areas where we can share resources and services with neighboring communities in an effort to save our taxpayers money and lower the costs of government. All across New York State taxpayers are paying for duplications of services. In an economy where each dollar is more important than the last, we as elected leaders must look to eliminate those duplications. We must be willing to cooperate with neighboring municipalities, other levels of government and with private entities where possible if it means saving our constituents money. Recently a study was completed by a private engineering firm that explored the potential cost savings to taxpayers through sharing water distribution services between the Cities of Niagara Falls, Lockport and North Tonawanda. In the weeks ahead the Common Council and I will be

reviewing the findings of this study with the intent on finding a solution that is feasible and saves our residents money. After meeting recently with Wheatfield Town Supervisor Bob Cliffe, as well as Ninth District County legislator Russ Rizzo, I have directed our City Engineer to work with the Town of Wheatfield's engineer to look at ways that may reduce flooding in both communities, particularly in the Northwest part of the City on Witmer Road. By working together, with both our County officials, and neighboring communities, I believe that we can save our taxpayers money and provide quality services.

Controlling our spending is only half the battle. The other is expanding our tax base. We must attract new businesses and investment in North Tonawanda to ensure the prosperity of our City in the years to come. Thanks to the efforts of our Community Development team and the Lumber City Development Corporation, we have begun to see the re-emergence of our downtown area, and other businesses have taken up residence across the City. In my first 54 days in office, I have visited over 30 businesses, as I promised during my campaign. I have met with entrepreneurs, inventors, CEO's, engineers and manufacturers, and I have asked them one question, "What can my office do to help you"? After each meeting with these courageous and hard working individuals and their employees, I come away inspired and determined to do whatever we can to keep businesses here and keep them strong.

The redevelopment of the Remington Rand building into the Lofts at Remington Rand will be a major cornerstone of our new downtown. Let me be clear, government does not create businesses or jobs; however we have an obligation to create an

environment that attracts business and thereby assists in job creation and expanding our tax base. If we do not expand our tax base, if we do not grow, then we will surely continue to decline. Then the only alternative then will be to raise taxes on an ever decreasing citizenry or massive cuts and possibly the elimination of services altogether. Those are decisions that we already are being forced into making. It is imperative that we look for ways to cut spending while at the same time creating a place where business will help grow our City.

This brings me to Walmart. Many want to see it. Some do not. It is now in the hands of the courts and our capable City Attorney Shawn Nickerson. I support the Walmart project because it will increase tax revenues, it will create jobs and it will encourage many of our residents to spend some of their hard earned money right here where they live. Now I do not think that Walmart will be the savior of our City. I will make sure that the SuperWalmart will be done right, will be aesthetically pleasing and correct and that any and all second and third effects and impacts on neighboring residents will be addressed.

We have begun to see much anticipated work on the Buffalo Bolt business park in the past week. The construction of this park is merely the first step in revitalizing the Oliver St business corridor. Our focus will be to make sure that the business park is full. Through our Community Development office and the Niagara County Industrial Development agency, it is my hope that we as a City and as a County can provide incentives that will attract more business to North Tonawanda.

The Gratwick Riverside Marina, formerly the Niagara River Yacht Club remains empty. It has remained empty for the past 6 years. In that time not one land use study was ever done. Until September of 2009, no Requests for proposal were ever put out. While I realize that many have grown tired of a vacant building sitting on our waterfront not generating any revenue, I inherited this situation and I intend on doing the work necessary to ensure that we get the best possible outcome and something that makes sense and fits with the long term vision of our waterfront. The Lumber City Development Corporation approached me about being involved with putting together a new RFP and with the potential marketing of the sight. I have authorized them to initiate a land use/feasibility study to answer some very basic, yet pertinent questions: What is the demand for another marina? How many slips could reliably be filled? What other uses of that land might be feasible? What costs will be associated with the revitalization of this land, both to the taxpayers and to any private developer or proprietor? It may be hard to believe, but these questions were never answered in the past six years that it has remained vacant. Our City engineer, the Lumber City Development Corporation and our Waterfront Commission have all endorsed the idea of a feasibility study. Why? Because it makes sense. It is my intent that we will have a study completed within six months and that we will have an RFP put together and out to prospective bidders by the fall of 2010.

Right next door to the Gratwick Riverside Marina, is the City's newest asset, and one of the cornerstones and future of our waterfront, Gratwick Riverside Park. After years of negotiations with Niagara Mohawk, now National Grid, and thanks to the efforts of City Attorney Shawn Nickerson, one of the City's best resources is once again ours. This summer, construction will begin on a brand new fishing pier that will bring people

to our waterfront and serve as the first step toward the rebirth of our waterfront along the Niagara River.

When I took office some 54 days ago, I inherited a budget deficit in our Water fund of \$480,000. This was the result of poor, and in some cases irresponsible budgetary decisions made by the previous administration. The majority of this shortfall, \$250,000 worth, is the result of reduced electric costs at our wastewater treatment plant budgeted by my predecessor, the supposed result of a settlement with the New York Power Authority. The problem is that there is no evidence that any such figure was ever discussed, as evidenced by the fact that the other municipalities involved in negotiations namely the City of Tonawanda, Grand Island, Amherst and the Town of Tonawanda did not reduce their projected electrical costs. The fact that these decisions as well as others, were made prior to my taking office, does not change in any way my responsibility to deal with the consequences of these decisions. I am not going to punish our taxpayers for the poor decisions of others. I am calling on the Common Council to take whatever actions necessary outside of raising the rates for homeowners, to close this gap. I will continue to work with our County Representatives and our State leaders to support them in all their attempts to make sure that Niagara County, and North Tonawanda receive the benefit that is rightfully ours from the Power Authority. Recently I submitted a list of three priority projects to the Niagara County Industrial Development Agency that I believe will benefit the taxpayers of North Tonawanda and that I believe should be considered in part or whole of any settlement with the Power Authority. Those three projects are the new business park already under way at the former Buffalo Bolt site, where an “energy free zone” would be a huge incentive to attract businesses to that site.

The redevelopment of Tonawanda Island, where funds for cleanup and remediation, as well as the reconstruction of the Durkee Bridge will spurn development and create countless jobs. And the redevelopment of the former Durez site into something that benefits our residents and taxpayers. In the coming months I will work with the Common Council, our Community Development team, the Lumber City Development Corporation and representatives from Occidental Chemical Corporation to market that site to potential private developers. Reduced power in the form of low cost electricity for our wastewater treatment plant would no doubt be a welcome first step by the Power Authority that they not do what they say and mean what they do.

During my campaign for Mayor, I said that it was my intent to bring a renewable, clean energy site to North Tonawanda. As a first step in that effort, my office, along with the Common Council authorized Larsen Engineers to submit an application for a grant through the New York State Energy Reduction Agency for the purposes of performing a comprehensive energy audit of all City facilities. The ultimate goal of this audit will be to identify where the City can save money by being more energy efficient. Energy efficiency will not only save our residents countless tax dollars, but will also make North Tonawanda a contributor toward national energy independence.

Since I took office I have been working closely with the Property Maintenance Task Force in order to make sure that our City's neighborhoods are kept up and maintained and that residents and landlords who have questions have a citizen's board to reach out to. In one of my first acts upon taking office, I authorized the City Engineer to demolish the structure at 1380 Sherwood Ave. A property that had become an eyesore and even a

hazard due to years of neglect is gone and the City will be working to secure a fair market price for the empty lot, where a new home can be built. This is a great example of how a group of citizens like those on the Task Force can come together with local officials and make our neighborhoods a safer and better place. My office will continue to work with the Task Force, our Building Dept, the City Engineer and the Common Council to ensure that other properties that present a hazard to our community either physically, economically or both, are brought up to code or removed. We are currently in the process of securing and ultimately removing the incinerator at the corner of Walck and Erie Avenue. The much discussed property at 720 Oliver St., formerly the Mirror Room, will be auctioned next month. The high bidder will then come before our Common Council in conjunction with the Property Maintenance Task Force, the Building Dept and the City Engineer and lay out their plan to rehabilitate the property. If the plan is suitable to all parties involved, then my hope is that the Council will approve it and we can get that property back on the tax rolls. If the plan is not suitable for whatever reason, or there is no bidder interested, then I will pursue removal of the structure.

Despite the economic downturn, and the fiscal crises both nationally and in Albany, the City's bond rating according to Moody's Investor Service remains at an A3, one of the best in Western New York. Thanks to the efforts of our City Accountant and his staff, and the staff of the City Treasurer's office, our cash position and investments have remained strong comparatively speaking. However the City must continue to pursue ways to reduce, if not eliminate the subsidies to the Water fund from the General fund and must work to reduce our long term debt.

Our City, like many others around Western New York and the State, is facing very real and serious challenges. Our residents are over taxed and underpaid. Our government must remember that it exists to serve and offer a safe and secure place to live for our citizens. Every moment is an opportunity. This moment is no different. The choices we make today, next year and the years to come will determine what kind of City we leave to our children and grandchildren. I am determined that a leaner, more efficient City government will result in a more prosperous City, where businesses are not only welcome but thrive and where kids can not only live, but work. There is no doubt that the next 12-18 months will have its share of difficult decisions. However we cannot shirk our duty in making those decisions. I cannot do it alone. I will need the help of the Common Council, our County and State leaders, City Department heads and workers, Union leaders and members, and most importantly, our residents. This is our City, and together we can make sure that it remains a great City. Thank you.