

State of the City Address

Mayor Michael D. Belsky

February 8, 2010

Good evening ladies and gentlemen, fellow members of the Council, Staff and good citizens of Highland Park. I am honored to speak to you this evening about our many accomplishments of the preceding twelve months and to outline an ambitious but realistic 2010 agenda that focuses on maintaining Highland Park as one of the best communities in America in which to live and work.

I am certain that this past year will be remembered as one of the most turbulent years in our nation's history. The economic turmoil combined with two, ongoing, major, overseas wars have caused us to re-evaluate our priorities and to reassess our lives. In recent days, the devastating earthquake in Haiti has reminded us of the fragility of life. At the same time it reminds us of the incredible compassion and determination of the American people to reach out to the helpless during a time of great need. Hillary Hecktman, a nurse and a 2004 graduate of Highland Park High School, responded to the tragedy in Haiti by raising over \$500,000 for Project Medishare and

filling a plane with essential medical supplies. These supplies are now on the ground in Port-Au-Prince.

There are other examples of commitment and sacrifice by Highland Park's home-grown soldiers and sailors who are guarding our lives and liberties on distant shores. One such individual is Lieutenant Wes Shields, a 2003 Highland Park High School graduate, who is currently aboard the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower aircraft carrier stationed near Afghanistan and Iraq. These young people demonstrate the essential character traits that make us proud to be Americans living in Highland Park.

With the uncertainty surrounding economic and political circumstances both in our country and internationally, it is essential that we focus on the business here at home.

And in my view, we have done just that.

In 2009, the City staff and members of this Council worked to create a budget that would provide a superior level of service at a lower cost. This accomplishment is due in part to the exemplary leadership displayed by this Council together with City Manager David Limardi, Finance Director Elizabeth Holleb, and each Department Director who

worked tirelessly to create this budget. The 2010 budget reflects current national economic trends, and is sensitive to a public that feels the affects of the depleted economy in their everyday lives. The ongoing collaboration between the City Council and Staff ensures that the City will continue to provide the highest level of services to the community. In early 2009, each Department Director recommended cost-effective methods to enhance service delivery. Combined, this resulted in eliminating 15 full-time positions, which yields an annual savings of \$1 million. In addition, residents will continue to enjoy one of the lowest sanitary sewer and water rates on

the North Shore. Overall, this year's Budget was reduced by \$11 million compared to 2009.

All cities, including Highland Park, will continue to face challenges. Municipalities must work together, along with the Northwest Municipal Conference, with regard to pension reform. We will also institute long-term revenue and expenditure forecasting from independent sources to allow us to better plan during times of resource volatility.

The key to a thriving municipality is a well-functioning downtown that remains the economic and social center of the community. Included in a thriving

downtown is an array of commercial, cultural arts and entertainment experiences. The purchase of the Highland Park Theatre by the City will enhance and expand these opportunities for our residents, as well as the entire North Shore. Approximately four months ago, we created the Theatre Advisory Task Force. To that end, I appointed a team of local residents and experts with significant backgrounds in the performing arts. This group will explore various re-use options available for the Theatre and provide recommendations to the Council. I'm confident that the Highland Park Theatre will one day become the cornerstone of our downtown cultural arts campus.

One of the most significant attributes of Highland Park is our long-term commitment to supporting the cultural arts community. A vibrant arts environment stimulates economic activity in a positive way for area merchants and restaurants, which in turn drives sales tax revenue, keeping our property taxes controlled. I'm proud to report that even in this difficult year, we were able to keep our property tax rate below 1%. This is due in part to the thorough work of the Finance Committee, and Council members Jim Kirsch and Larry Silberman for their expertise and knowledge for which we are all grateful.

Over the past year the Music Institute of Chicago opened its expanded facility within the walls of the Highland Park Community House, significantly enhancing the cultural arts campus shared with The Art Center of Highland Park. The Art Center has expanded its programming and classroom attendance, and consistently opens its doors to neighborhood and civic organizations in an effort to reach new constituents.

Several strategic plans are working concurrently to provide Highland Park with renewed vision and direction that will help to secure the City's future as a leader in innovative and responsible practices. First,

the Department of Community Development is working with the Roundtable Advisory Group on the Central Business District Master Plan, which will update and energize the existing 2001 Plan. As I have often said, the central business district is “everybody’s neighborhood” and continued success of this area is critical for the well-being of the entire community. This plan will assess existing conditions and incorporate public participation in order to ensure the voice of the community is adequately represented. We are counting on Councilman Scott Levenfeld’s experience as the liaison to the Plan Commission to assure implementation of Plan recommendations.

In order to stimulate economic activity, the Downtown Highland Park Alliance pursued an innovative marketing campaign to promote businesses, restaurants and boutiques in Downtown Highland Park. The Alliance was a lead sponsor during a number of events that brought thousands of people to the City, including the Taste of Highland Park, the Sidewalk Sale, and the Holiday Lighting Ceremony. Most recently, the Alliance's efforts can be seen in the installation of new highway signs at Central Avenue and Deerfield Road to direct traffic to Downtown Highland Park.

Having said that, we must continue to work and grow our economic base to assure a sound future. Now is not the time for us to get mired down in process. All of our resources in the BEDC, the Alliance, and the Chamber must – as they say in football – “get after it.” Identify the vacancies, research the possibilities, and bring business home to Highland Park. I also call on our public to be engaged. I have always spoken about the importance of shopping locally, but I would ask you to be our eyes and ears for new businesses as your travels take you through Chicagoland and beyond. Because in my view, there is no better place to be than in Highland Park. It is also imperative that landlords and property owners

work with the City to establish a positive economic environment. I personally will commit to working with these parties and help retain and attract business to this great city.

The City is also conducting a Ravinia Business District Market Analysis. This project will ultimately enhance the retail sales tax base of this area to support Highland Park's economic development objectives. It will also aid in the City's agenda to revitalize the Ravinia Business District as a viable mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly, retail environment that is positioned to attract new investment.

No community can thrive indefinitely unless it conserves its natural resources. This is why the City is creating a Sustainability and Climate Protection Plan. Working in concert with the Green Initiatives Alliance, the Plan will create a long-term vision and road map for ensuring environmental protection for future generations. Each resident has the capability as well as the obligation to become advocates and stewards for the environment. This strategic plan will provide the community with resources to make a positive impact.

Our efforts to protect natural resources and the environment have been acknowledged nationally.

Highland Park was recognized last June as a finalist for the 2009 Mayors' Climate Protection Awards by the U.S. Conference of Mayors. Highland Park's Green Initiatives Alliance was selected for exemplifying the ideals of sustainability and climate protection.

In October, the City of Highland Park received the 2009 Irwin A. Bock Award for Excellence in Public Administration in the category of Community Environmental Stewardship from the Northwest Municipal Conference. The Bock Award is presented to communities that reduce their impact on the environment and promote sustainable practices for

their residents. Highland Park was recognized for implementing initiatives such as a commercial and multi-family waste and recycling franchise, electronics recycling, and implementation of a hybrid-vehicle fleet. These projects emphasize the City's continuing effort to mitigate its impact on finite resources while providing essential services to the community. One of this City's greatest advocates for environmental sustainability is Councilman Mandel, whose involvement with SWALCO and the Green Initiatives Alliance provides leadership and direction toward a "greener" future for the entire community.

One of the projects I am most proud of is Hyacinth Place. This eco-friendly affordable housing development reached full capacity in 2009 and was designated LEED Gold. The sustainable townhomes captured regional and national attention for its environmentally-friendly design while maintaining its affordability and proximity to public transportation.

The Council, Staff and appropriate commissions are attuned to the concept of “complete streets” and looking at roads and transportation from a comprehensive approach that considers biking and walking, in addition to roads. I would also like to

thank Councilman Rotering for her recent efforts and dedication to the Traffic Commission. I am confident that her involvement will bring many positive results.

And although we were not successful in convincing PACE to purchase alternative fuel vehicles with TARP funds, I am pleased to announce that PACE has purchased two hybrid buses for future use in Highland Park on regular routes. However, this is a small start and we will continue in the quest for a sustainable environment.

Due to the exemplary leadership of the City Council and Staff, public safety efforts are reaching beyond

the City limits of Highland Park. In 2009 a new, community-based initiative called *Parents. The Anti Drug* was created that is comprised of parents, local government and school officials, clergy and healthcare providers. The group's mission is to generate conversation and provide accurate information about alcohol, tobacco and drug use in Bannockburn, Deerfield, Highland Park, Highwood and Riverwoods. One of the biggest advocates and leaders in this initiative is Councilwoman Olian, who always puts 110% behind every project and is able to rally the efforts of those around her for tremendous causes.

We are acutely aware of the pain and suffering alcohol and drug abuse inflicts upon members of our society, their families and their communities. This devastation hit close to home after the tragic deaths of two teenagers following a car accident in Deerfield in 2006. Only parental responsibility will eliminate these toxic influences from our lives. Complementing this program, the new and more comprehensive Liquor Control Ordinances went into effect in 2009. This includes the requirement to train restaurant servers, which supports Highland Park's efforts to insure that alcohol is not sold to underage youths.

The Council-Manager form of government under which this City operates continues to provide ethical and transparent government. To that end, the City, School Districts and Park District held “Know Your Government” workshops to educate the public regarding the mission of each organization. Moreover, the Finance Department created a central portal on the City’s Web site entitled “Know Your City’s Finances” that allows residents to access financial documents and information, and provide greater transparency of City finances to the public.

The City’s Finance Director also chairs the Intergovernmental Finance Committee, comprised of

finance officers from the City, Park District, School Districts 112 and 113, and the Library. This Committee identified shared purchasing opportunities in 2009. In 2010, efforts will be made to implement these recommendations. As purchase and service contracts of each agency expire, timelines will be established to maximize opportunities for joint purchasing in an effort to achieve cost savings. This will reduce duplication in service delivery, and lead to lower operating costs for Highland Park taxing bodies.

For the 15th consecutive year, the Government Finance Officers Association presented the

Distinguished Budget Presentation Award to the City for its annual budget. Additionally, for the 24th consecutive year, the GFOA awarded a Certificate of Achievement for Excellence in Financial Reporting to the City for its Comprehensive Annual Financial Report. These national awards recognize the City's excellence in financial reporting.

In order to improve services while reducing long-term costs, the Public Works Department unveiled the Citywide leak detection program that is designed to identify and reduce unaccounted water losses within the City. By detecting leaks early, the City

protects its water distribution infrastructure while increasing its efficiency.

The City is also fully realizing the savings of the brine production system this winter. The salt brine unit aids in reducing the amount of salt applied to the City streets. Salt brine usage as part of snow and ice removal efforts by Public Works Staff has resulted in a 40% cost savings in materials used to keep the City streets safe during winter months. And with the help of Senator Susan Garrett and Representative Karen May, the City was able to receive funding and resources to pave the entire length of Sheridan Road, an investment in the entire community.

Another community investment includes proactive management of stormwater. In order to address stormwater management, we joined a consortium of communities, along with the Lake County Stormwater Management Commission and the Skokie Drainage District, to address this serious problem at a regional level. It is our goal to site and fund regional detention basins along both the Lake Michigan and Skokie River watersheds.

Partnerships are imperative when providing constituent services. We recognized the impending termination of Comcast's agreement at the end of

2009 to provide cable television access to the public. However, we also seized an opportunity to partner with Deerfield, Highwood and Winnetka to provide a public access studio to more than one community. Highland Park realized the importance of maintaining this service and received cooperation from Comcast to outfit a new and permanent public access television studio within the Police Station. This decision enables the public and volunteers continuing use of this unique resource.

Our great City continues to shine in the realm of special events, especially with regard to annual summertime favorites such as the Taste of Highland

Park, the Port Clinton Art Fair, July 4th and the Thursday night concert series. Your attendance and participation at these events is heartening to all of us who work hard to build community spirit. These events set Highland Park apart from many of our suburban neighbors.

Earlier last year, the City of Highland Park entered into an agreement with Ravinia Festival to help the City defray costs for providing infrastructure and services for this internationally recognized and respected music festival. As part of this agreement, the City of Highland Park shares 30% of the total revenue collected from Ravinia with YEA! Highland

Park. Working with the Highland Park Community Foundation, YEA! Highland Park is a tremendously important funding source that supports cultural arts and social service groups in Highland Park. In 2009, the City of Highland Park provided \$212,000 to YEA! for its share of Ravinia proceeds. This annual income will go a long way to serve people in need, particularly in these challenging times.

In addition to local cultural initiatives, the Sister Cities Foundation established a new relationship with Modena, Italy, demonstrating the expanding cultural influence of Highland Park. The Foundation also held a “Day of the Child” event at the Highland Park

Library in May celebrating the Hispanic community. Approximately 300 youth participated in cultural exchanges through music, entertainment, art projects, and reading programs. Finally, a Gourmet Benefit Gala was held in October that brought chefs and dignitaries from Puerto Vallarta to Highland Park to commemorate the Sister Cities organization. This event also raised more than \$10,000 for several deserving charities in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico.

Last November, the North Shore Health Center in Highland Park was recognized as one of only eight health clinics in the country as a national model for community engagement and partnership. The Federal

Health Resources and Services Administration highlighted the Clinic because of the extraordinary joint efforts between Lake County Health Department, the City of Highland Park, the Healthcare Foundation of Highland Park and Friends for Health, an organization made up of resident volunteers who have raised significant funds to expand the clinic's services. This collaboration has already proven to be a model for communities nationwide.

In one other example of positive collaboration, Healthy Highland Park and the Healthcare Foundation of Highland Park sponsored the

community weight-loss challenge, Losers Win, for residents and workers. After ten-weeks, nearly 100 people completed the challenge and collectively lost over 700 pounds. As another means of creating community health and awareness, the Healthcare Foundation of Highland Park provided a grant for the implementation of a program to place automated external defibrillators in businesses and to train the employees in their uses.

Highland Park is a remarkable community with innovative and positive leadership demonstrated at every level on a daily basis. Cooperation between all stakeholders, public and private, will continue to

unite the community and provide a solid foundation for the future. A component of the foundation includes the Ft. Sheridan community. Highland Park has a collective goal of working with state and federal legislators to assure permanent funding of impact aid for our valued military residents and families at Ft. Sheridan.

Despite the current economic challenges, we will not compromise on public safety, infrastructure enhancement, and quality of life programs. I commend the Staff and City Council for their tremendous efforts to find creative ways to maintain services while insuring that our community remains

vibrant. I have the utmost confidence and hope that together we will accomplish even more in the days ahead. It is easy to be a critic – to speak of demise – so tonight I challenge the Staff, the Council and the public to speak of progress and solutions.

I would like to leave you with one of my favorite quotes from Thomas Paine.

“These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands by it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that

the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph.

What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly: it is dearness only that gives every thing its value.”