

# STATE OF THE CITY AND GOALS FOR 2010

## CITY OF STAFFORD, TEXAS

BY MAYOR LEONARD SCARCELLA

27 JANUARY 2010

We leave behind a turbulent decade. We enter one that presents a challenge to our local economy as it scrambles to rebound from a tumble the likes of which occurred only once before in the City's history. With the near collapse of the international financial structure caused by an insatiable and unchecked greed on Wall Street, unprecedented steps were taken by the U.S. government to salvage the "too big to fail" companies (some of which are now handing out multi-million dollar bonuses to those very persons who triggered this debacle), and in doing so threw the people and businesses on "Main Street" and across the country under the bus. The results were devastating effects on our vibrant corporate network which continues to reverberate with negative impacts upon this City and its citizens. For anyone who knows Stafford knows that our citizens benefit immensely from a strong local economy enjoying the luxury of zero property taxes and highly acclaimed services. One fact is clear: Erode the

underpinnings, and the damage is significant. And, that is exactly what has happened to the Stafford economy.

Despite the shock to the system, this City has prepared for the last two decades to withstand such a severe downturn. By accumulating substantial cash reserves, insulation was put in place to work through a protracted decline. Maintaining a lean and efficient staff, with the assurance of no layoffs, and providing quality health care and other benefits are the basis for preserving outstanding services. The successful pursuit of eliminating debt - - something other governmental entities rationalize as a desirable but unrealistic goal - - is now being touted by a growing chorus of learned admirers. Couple this with our zero property tax, and it is increasingly evident of the wisdom of this City's approach.

In spite of the adversities of 2009, Stafford achieved numerous notable accomplishments. Leading the list was the completion of the construction of US 90A. Enhance that with the launching of an extensive landscaping program to beautify this corridor traversing the town. Add to that what might be one of the most popular successes: the Quiet Zone negotiated with Union Pacific Railroad, which will eliminate train horns that have blown in this City at all hours of the day and night for more than 150 years. The result is the delightfully changing face and image of the City.

Another impressive project which garnered much praise was the construction, and dedication last August, of the Margaret Havens Historical Memorial Garden. Many have marveled at not only the unique beauty of the park but the description of the historical evolution of the City over 180 years and the people most prominent in that effort.

The Police Department had another outstanding year. Under the leadership of long-time Chief Bonny Krahn, sophisticated technology was added to the consistent work product of our men and women in blue, who assembled a truly impressive record. Unfortunately, an officer had to fire his weapon when attacked by a man whose parents had placed a 911 call due to their inability to control their son. The assailant was killed. His parents have sued the officer, the Chief and the City, which is vigorously defending against what we believe is this unfounded federal lawsuit.

The Municipal Court has more direct contact with the general public than any other City department. It is imperative that people respect and appreciate the manner in which they and their issues are handled in this forum. Under Director Nicole Nguyen, the efficiency of the staff and fairness of Judge Debra Champagne, the Court continues to receive accolades.

With the heightened emphasis on the maximum utilization of our resources as the economy struggles, Finance Director Karen Austin and her lean and capable staff did a superlative job of monitoring each dollar, as well as handling everything from personnel to insurance to contractual matters.

General administration is often taken for granted. Yet it is highly demanding - - and very important. This involves meeting notices, open records requests, election procedures, correspondence, ordinance compilation, minutes and a host of other responsibilities managed competently and well by City Secretary Bonnie Baiamonte. She is assisted by Dolores Steffek, who has served as the "traffic cop" in City Hall for several years, but will be retiring at the end of March.

Municipal television programming, long a major pride of the City, improved and expanded under S-METV Director Carolyn Entricht. She has upgraded numerous operational and technical aspects of the viewing product. A particularly beneficial addition was the production of a promotional video of the City by "The Economic Report" under the leadership of noted TV personality Greg Gumbel. This video is now being aired in many spots across the country in hopes of snaring companies that would benefit from the tax and business advantages available in Stafford.

The Planning and Zoning Commission lost its long-time Chairwoman, and champion, Alma Birdwell, who passed away in November. This Commission is at the center of planning for the City's future. The seven-member body has done an excellent job in setting an informed course for quality development. The challenge will be heightened without the commitment and dedication of Mrs. Birdwell.

The Stafford Economic Development Corporation is a critical element in advancing the progress and prosperity of this City. US 90A construction and landscaping enhancements, including the forthcoming railroad Quiet Zone, the much awaited monuments on US 59, the ongoing enhancements and maintenance of the Stafford Centre and "The Economic Report" video are all products of this Corporation guided by a most astute board and its administrative assistant Marian Rocha.

Continuing to impress is the ISO rating of One maintained by the Stafford Fire Department, placing it in the top 100, out of nearly 50,000 fire fighting units in the nation. In spite of this ongoing extraordinary accomplishment, Chief Larry DiCamillo and his outstanding crew of 79 strive to elevate its top-ranked performance.

Retaining a zero property tax for 15 consecutive years caught the attention of, among others, former presidential candidate Congressman

Ron Paul who introduced a congratulatory entry into the *Congressional Record* in June acknowledging the unique and bold policy for assisting taxpayers. This policy remains the pinnacle priority of the City.

A correlation of this approach to fiscal discipline is the ongoing effort to eliminate debt which resulted in cutting outstanding long-term obligations to below \$1.7 million and which is moving towards complete extinguishment in the next four years.

In the continuing pursuit of enhancing the appeal and appearance of the City, the newly passed zoning ordinance was put to the scrutiny of an Ad Hoc Committee of citizens working with City Council to refine regulations pertaining to the areas of the Island, US 90A and FM 1092. Still, much remains to be addressed in eliminating the unsightly and disparaging blemishes that pepper the landscape in these areas.

For 33 years, the Stafford Municipal School District has been a primary endeavor of this City. That effort continued in earnest as more municipal funds were expended to elevate the education of Stafford youngsters in the school. The only municipal school district in Texas has recently made substantive advances but still has deficiencies that prevent reaching its maximum potential. There is a clear sign that these shortcomings are prominently on the radar screen and being addressed.

Stafford's pursuit of educational opportunities expands beyond primary and secondary levels. The recently dedicated Houston Community College's elaborate Learning Hub on the Stafford Campus is illustrative of this. With the addition of this impressive facility, the student enrollment on the Stafford Campus now exceeds 10,000 - - the largest of all the more than 30 HCC campuses - - and places it among some of the most populated campuses in the State. For those out of work and desirous of upgrading their credentials, this is an oasis.

After the ravishes of Hurricane Ike had subsided, the emergency management umbrella, under the guidance of Coordinator Jennifer Taylor, was opened wide to address areas spotlighted by Ike, as well as a host of related items, to assist in insuring the safety of our citizens. Federal grants were secured to repair much of the damage to public facilities and for emergency generators for the operation of the Police Station and City Hall in times of power outages. Also, a specific grant for the City was sponsored in legislation by Congressman Al Green to secure \$100,000 in recently enacted federal legislation for the upgrading of the vitally important Emergency Operations Center.

Infrastructure enhancements were front and center last year, from the completion of US 90A to the acquisition of rights-of-way and engineering

plans for the multi-entity Stafford/Staffordshire Roads endeavor, which will connect the newly finished Fifth Street expansion to Beltway 8 at a total cost of \$19 million. Stafford will bear \$6 million of the total tab, with Harris and Fort Bend Counties, TxDOT, Fort Bend W.C.&I.D. No. 2 and a federal stimulus contribution raising the tally for the full cost. Improvements to Dulles Avenue and Brand Lane both received significant planning attention. The projects will have a combined cost of \$2½ million and will appreciably facilitate mobility in the City's southwest quadrant. These projects have been under the guidance of multi-faceted Public Works Director Lawrence Vaccaro with assistance from the new kid on the block, City Engineer Charles Russell, who recently joined the City after 20 years with TxDOT.

The Stafford Centre maintained its status as not only the crown jewel of our City but was recognized as the "signature image" of Fort Bend County. Enhancements consisting of heightened sound projection, new carpeting, a new dance floor, an improved ticket processor and an air conditioning upgrade propelled the Centre as an even more impressive venue. As a confirmation of the public's overwhelming acceptance of this showcase facility, attendance figures burst through the 1,000,000 visitors mark during the first five years of operation.

Turning the page and in view of the difficult travails we are facing, how do we meet the serious challenges of 2010?

## **G O A L S   F O R   2 0 1 0**

### **1.   BRING BACK THE STRONG ECONOMY.**

This is as tough a challenge as Stafford has faced in a quarter of a century. With the severe national recession materially impacting our manufacturing, warehousing, wholesaling and services - - the mainstays of the City's economy - - breathing vitality back into these sectors is a most daunting hurdle; and, these are not the only components of the City's economy which are struggling. In fact, few are at the level they were a year ago, which is most clearly illustrated by the substantive decline in City sales tax receipts. Despite this, the City must call on its ingenuity and resourcefulness to provide the best climate for businesses to operate profitably and efficiently. To facilitate this, Stafford must maintain its low taxes and its continuing strong efforts to improve the appealability of our town. Still, these alone will not solve the problem, but, will make a major step by lending much support to the business community to regain its footing and strength.

## **2. MAINTAIN ZERO PROPERTY TAX.**

The zero property tax is the most recognized attribute of this City. It brings in residents and affords our local businesses their best opportunity for reducing unnecessary costs. In line with maintaining this alluring tax advantage to attract people and companies to our City, a further suggestion is urged for each Stafford taxpayer. Specifically: Take the monies that are saved from no city property taxes and invest those funds in your home or business facility. A widespread application of this practice, especially on an annual basis, will result in a quite noticeable enhancement to this City and its vibrancy.

## **3. ELIMINATE DEBT.**

With the debt of the City decreasing notably to less than \$1¾ million, the City is not only gaining recognition for this unprecedented achievement but is also able to use hundreds of thousands of dollars for infrastructure that would have otherwise gone for interest payments. Further, these funds are used to pay for current improvements rather than some that are well into, or even past, their useful life. It would be quite easy to follow everyone else's lead, from the federal, state and local governments, of

piling up mountains of debt - - and claiming that the debt is manageable. This is not the wise and prudent course. More and more ordinary people, as well as highly touted experts, are paying close attention to mounting governmental debt which is being placed on the shoulders of taxpayers. Sticking to this goal that has been in process for more than a decade, the City will be debt free in four years and will have an even more laudable financial structure.

#### **4. REFINE ZONING.**

In spite of the economy, well-designed zoning still has to be one of the major goals of this City. With his leadership and daily attention, Zoning Administrator and Building Director Gene Bane has done an outstanding job enforcing zoning regulations. In order to achieve maximum results, he must be given the necessary tools. City Council and the Planning and Zoning Commission, together with the Ad Hoc Committee, two sets of consultants, staff and the City Attorney, have been working on this for the past two years. We are nearing some final refined regulations. However, we must not be deterred from letting a series of eyesores go unaddressed, and even worse, perpetuated. This would be a most undesirable result in view of the time, effort and money which has been spent on this process.

The future of this City is in its enticement, competitiveness and appeal. Without eliminating, or at least dramatically mitigating, these unsightly uses, no one should feel satisfied with this lengthy pursuit of elevating the appearance of our City.

## **5. CULTIVATE DIVERSITY.**

This City has long prided itself in bringing peoples of all races, cultures and creeds into a framework of working, playing, studying and praying together. As the number of races, cultures and faiths increase in our town, this becomes even more critical to strengthening the fibers that bind us into a community. Stafford has taken the lead in providing funding and facilities for the International Festival of Fort Bend, which attracted over 7,500 people and 38 cultures to the Stafford Centre last October. While this one event certainly does not address all of the issues related to diversity, it epitomizes that this City has truly become a focal point to these many divergent people looking for a place where they can feel welcome. We, however, cannot rest on our laurels. There should and must be a continuing effort to involve all of our people, as divergent as they may be, into every aspect of this City's life.

## **6. PROCEED WITH INFRASTRUCTURE IMPROVEMENTS.**

The Stafford/Staffordshire Road improvement project is poised for a bid letting by TxDOT in March. This multi-entity collaboration will require almost \$4 million in additional City funding. In spite of the very high cost and impact on the City's budget, we must proceed with all resolve to implement this construction. The improvements to Dulles Avenue in conjunction with the City of Sugar Land and Brand Lane working with Fort Bend County are highly desirable undertakings. They will also be extensive and have additional impacts on our budget and cash reserves to the tune of about \$2½ million. Both are anticipated to be ready for construction near the end of the year. Much caution has to be exercised to prevent the two operations from conflicting and creating severe mobility disruption in that portion of the City. The renovation of Kirkwood Road and extension of Cash Road are under consideration. However, there is uncertainty surrounding both of these endeavors, and the ability and desirability to implement are yet to be determined.

A cousin in the infrastructure arena is the involvement of the City in Sta-Mo Park, which lies in Missouri City. Negotiations are being led by Councilman Jeff Smith, head of the committee, to find the most viable and

economically sound approach to having this facility upgraded and accessible for the youngsters of Stafford to play baseball and softball. The decision on the best outcome should be made as soon as all factors have been thoroughly analyzed, including negotiations with Missouri City and possible involvement of Fort Bend County. Many are watching, especially Stafford parents and children, in hopes of having a much better arrangement, and facility, than what currently exists.

#### **7. MAINTAIN STRONG EMERGENCY SERVICES.**

Police, fire, emergency medical services, homeland security and gang suppression are all areas in which this City must place special emphasis and resources. With the strong and dedicated efforts of our Police and Fire Departments and Emergency Management team, Stafford has distinguished itself in these areas - - and must continue to do so. One problem beginning to gnaw evermore at us, and those who surround us, is the potential for increased gang violence, especially coming from those connected with the well-financed Mexican drug cartels. This is a problem that requires not only constant vigilance but the assistance of area, state and federal agencies in what could become our biggest terrorist threat.

**8. ELEVATE SMSD.**

Superintendent H.D. Chambers is placing strong emphasis on the need to significantly elevate SMSD and to also address obvious shortcomings. It has often been said that SMSD is the heart of Stafford. It certainly will have a profound effect on the future of this City, just as it has impacted the City since its creation in 1977. A constructive collaboration between the City Council, the SMSD Board and school administration is as imperative today as it has ever been. With a special study partially funded by the City to prescribe a direction of excellence, there is no better time to assess and strongly pursue the district that was envisioned by the people of Stafford more than three decades ago: A premier school district which is diverse, innovative and personalized.

**9. PROMOTE THE STAFFORD CENTRE.**

This unique, versatile and attractive venue known as the Stafford Centre has exceeded all expectations. Led by Bryan Blaum, President of the managing firm FMsquared, and Administrator Susan Ricks, and despite the tremendous successes there is still the ability to elevate this Performing Arts Theatre and Convention Centre into a more distinguished profile than

it already enjoys. This is truly the gem of the City. We must do all in our power to make this beacon shine even brighter.

#### **10. CONSERVE RESOURCES.**

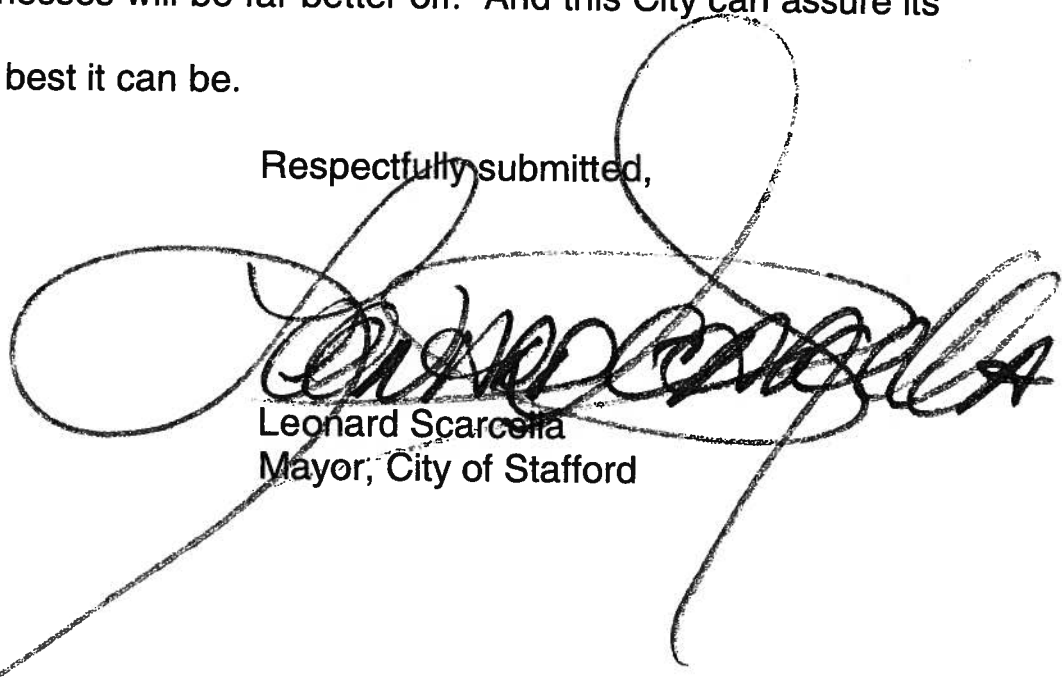
Over the last decade-and-a-half, and since eliminating the City's property tax, Stafford has seen its resource base and cash fund balances grow dramatically. With the devastating recession still having substantial negative ramifications, our cash fund balances are being materially reduced. Every effort by all who have a say in this, including City Council, Department Heads and City employees, must strive to obtain the maximum benefits out of every dollar this City commits to spend, and spend only what is necessary. Although this message is no different than that in the past, the urgency is much greater and will be scrutinized even more closely.

### **CONCLUSION**

There is no doubt about it: 2010 will be a most difficult year for the City of Stafford. Highlighted by declining sales tax receipts, several million dollars expended on major street improvement projects and an overall floundering economy lead to the obvious result that

there will be many obstacles - - some quite formidable - - to overcome. However, this is even more reason to stick with the principles and policies that have elevated us. Contrary to those local entities that are creatures of the property tax, we long ago shed that yoke. This has led to phenomenal growth beyond expectations. To resort to try doing it like everyone else because times are tough would sabotage the unique advantages gained over the past 15 years. Now, more than ever, is the time to remain committed to what got us here. At the end of the day - - and the year - - we will be pleased and proud we did. Our citizens, taxpayers and businesses will be far better off. And this City can assure its ascent to being the best it can be.

Respectfully submitted,



Leonard Scarcella  
Mayor, City of Stafford