



Mayor Virg Bernero
2010 State of the City Address

“We Build the Future!”

January 25, 2010
Southside Community Center/Hill Auditorium

Thank you President Robinson.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is a real privilege to share this stage with my colleagues, City Clerk Chris Swope and the members of the Lansing City Council – especially our two newest members, Jessica Yorko and Tina Houghton.

Let me also introduce you to Lansing’s First Lady, the love of my life, Teri Bernero. One of our two daughters, Virginia, is with us tonight as well. Thank you for being my strength and my compass.

I want to say a special thanks to our co-hosts this evening at the newly refurbished Southside Community Center/Hill Auditorium – Lansing Schools Superintendent Dr. T.C. Wallace and Jack Davis, the new president of the Lansing School Board.

We couldn’t ask for better partners in making sure that all of our kids get a 21st century education. Thanks for all you do.

Citizens of Lansing, I don’t need to tell you that these are turbulent times. Together, we’ve experienced the greatest economic crisis in the American heartland since the Great Depression.

And yet, for all that we’ve been through, here we stand. Strong and determined. Unbeaten and unbowed.

We’ve taken some heavy blows, but we haven’t buckled and we haven’t broken, because we’re tough Michiganders.

If we get knocked down, we get back up. We get back to work, because that’s who we are. We are fighters. We are survivors.

Most of all, we are builders – each one of us – and we each have something to contribute to building a more prosperous future.

If you are a parent or a teacher, you are a builder. Every time you help shape the mind and the character of a child, you create the building blocks of their future.

If you are an autoworker, every cleaner and greener vehicle you build strengthens our advanced manufacturing capacity and our global competitiveness.

If you are a small business owner or employee who works hard every day, you are building the future of our community's prosperity, one customer at a time.

We are all builders, and together, we are building the future of Lansing – job by job, neighborhood by neighborhood, and child by child.

I believe we are tougher than the problems we face. We will rise to the challenges of our times, and we will go through, over, under or around every obstacle that stands between us and a better future.

I am so proud of this community in how we have come together to wrap our arms around those who are suffering the severe hardships of today's economy. People are hurting, but we have risen to the challenge of caring for each other, because we know we are all in this together.

And when it comes to caring for each other, Lansing school children are answering the call of our brothers and sisters suffering in Haiti. Leading this effort, Dr. Freya Rivers and her students at Bingham Elementary started collecting coins and soon children in schools across the city took up the cause of caring.

Dr. Rivers and her students are with us tonight. Thank you for showing that our compassion knows no borders.

I also want to recognize the efforts of those who have devoted their time, their resources and their hearts to the cause of uplifting those who are suffering in our community. Lansing's faith community and our human service agencies have risen to the challenge, helping to feed the hungry and house the homeless.

People like Dr. Joan Jackson Johnson, our director of Human Relations, are leading the way to make sure that we leave no one behind. Dr. Johnson is in the hospital tonight recovering from emergency surgery. Her prognosis is excellent, but I ask all of you to please keep her in your prayers.

Because we have come together to overcome our challenges, the state of our city is good – and getting better.

With the help of the best economic development team in Michigan, I have made it my central mission to grow Lansing's economy and create new jobs. We have relentlessly pursued a job growth strategy that targets retention and expansion of existing businesses.

We have attracted new job-creating investments, and diversified our jobs base into the emerging sectors of the knowledge-based economy.

Our strategy is working. In partnership with the private sector, over the past four years we have leveraged more than a half-billion dollars in new investment that will create over 4,000 new jobs and retain thousands more.

At the Ottawa Power Station, The Christman Company and the Accident Fund are transforming one of the relics of our past into a powerful new engine that will drive job growth for years to come. Hundreds of workers in the skilled trades are on the job right now, building Lansing's future, brick by brick and beam by beam.

The Accident Fund project is the centerpiece of a remarkable transformation underway on both sides of our downtown riverfront. The new Lansing City Market is open for business, Riverfront Park got a \$3.2 million "extreme makeover", and Pat Gillespie's \$25 million Market Place project is set to break ground this year.

Across this city, smart and bold entrepreneurs are fully engaged in the global economy. And they are winning, successfully growing their businesses while keeping good jobs right here in Lansing. Lansing-based companies like Neogen and Emergent Biosolutions, Niowave and Techsmith -- all are global leaders in their respective fields.

We're a major hub of the financial services industry, with national leaders like the Accident Fund Company, Jackson National Life and Auto Owners headquartered right here in the Lansing region.

In the past year, even with the winds of recession howling in our face, our Economic Development Corporation completed two key projects in this sector that will result in hundreds of new jobs in the city. Blue Cross Blue Shield announced that they will move 250 employees into the former Accident Fund headquarters in downtown Lansing. And Jackson National Life has moved 150 more positions into their south Lansing facility.

John Brown, Vice President at JNL, thank you for believing in Lansing.

But we aren't resting there. We are diversifying our economic base to secure Lansing's place in tomorrow's economy. We are leveraging the research prowess of Michigan State University to spin off companies that will build the products of the future.

And we are still a proud GM town. Our plants are the best, our workers are the best, and that's why we came out of the GM bankruptcy with more production, not less.

For the third year in a row, one of Motor Trend's 10 Best Cars is – of course – the Cadillac CTS, made right here in Lansing, Michigan. At our Delta plant we are adding lines and workers from

Spring Hill, Tennessee. When was the last time you heard about 400 people moving to Michigan?

Let me tell you – the bridge to the future that our President provided to keep Michigan’s auto industry from falling by the wayside was worth every single penny.

When the future of our hometown car company was in doubt, I’m proud to have stood shoulder-to-shoulder every step of the way with our brothers and sisters in the UAW – and all working people – as we fought to keep good-paying jobs in Michigan.

Of course we still have our work cut out for us to get our economy back on track.

One of the greatest obstacles to the creation of new jobs is the continued inability of small businesses to secure the credit they need to grow and compete in the global economy.

I formed a group of mayors from across Michigan and America and we took the fight to Washington DC. We told the White House and Congress that their generous bailouts for Wall Street and the big banks weren’t trickling down to Main Street. We told them that we will never see a true recovery until our businesses can get access to the capital they need to succeed.

Here in Lansing, we’re going to tackle that problem head on. Tonight I’m pleased to announce that we will launch a new Small Business Growth Fund that will provide loans of up to \$35,000 to small businesses so they can grow and create jobs.

Our Economic Development Corporation, led by Bob Trezise, will partner with Denise Peeks and her Entrepreneur Institute of Mid-Michigan to get these critical resources directly to growing businesses. The EDC will manage the fund, and the Institute will provide the training and support that our local entrepreneurs need to succeed.

The Small Business Growth Fund will be complemented by our new Go Green Revolving Fund. The Go Green Fund will assist small companies in making their operations and facilities more energy efficient.

Our efforts to become the cleanest, greenest city in Michigan will ramp up in other ways this year. We will make city buildings more energy efficient and install rooftop solar panels that generate clean energy. Our great partnership with the Lansing Board of Water and Light will grow even stronger. With the help of a federal grant, we will install recharging stations for plug-in hybrid electric vehicles.

And we will continue to push Washington to help us redevelop our closed automotive sites, creating new business opportunities and new jobs in the fastest-growing sectors of the new green economy.

Our success in the face of such extraordinary challenges didn’t happen by accident, but by design. It happened because we had the vision to see what Lansing could become, and the leadership and ability to bring people together to get the job done.

It happened because we assembled a team of the best and brightest, and leveraged public and private resources in new and innovative ways. We created partnerships with our brothers and sisters in labor and in the business community.

Together we demanded tangible results, on time and on budget. We have been unrelenting in our pursuit of new jobs and new opportunities for all Lansing residents.

It's a new day with a new attitude in Lansing. We are successful where many others have fallen short. We are proving that government leadership can be inspired leadership. Working together, we are showing the rest of the state how to make Michigan work again.

We are especially proud to be able to show a brighter future to our children, who we know are worried about what tomorrow may bring. We are here today to show that Lansing is a place with a future and that they have a place in our growing and vibrant community. This is a fight for the future and I'm here to say the future looks brighter every day.

Let there be no doubt – this is a choice between moving forward or falling back. We now have evidence that we are making progress and undeniably moving forward. Here in Lansing we are showing a struggling state how determined action can overcome the status quo. It is a fight between atrophy and action, and we are winning that fight.

While we continue to work to move Lansing forward, we must also address the continuing challenges we will face in balancing our city budget.

Cities across Michigan are in the same boat, facing declining tax revenues, spiraling costs, and broken promises from state government. Yet few cities have responded to these challenges as effectively as we have here in Lansing.

Over the last four budget cycles, we have retooled our city government into a leaner and more efficient organization. We have balanced every budget without raising taxes, without spending away our reserves, and without laying off a single employee.

We've made the tough decisions along the way to keep our fiscal house in order, and because we kept a steady hand on the wheel, our AA+ credit rating is still intact. And we continue to work in good faith with our employee unions to overcome the unprecedented fiscal challenges we face.

Leadership starts at the top, and for this reason I have led the way by cutting my salary. I will not ask our employees to make any sacrifice that I am unwilling to make.

I want to take a moment to thank all of our city employees, my Cabinet and my staff for making sacrifices in these challenging times. We are all working harder, faster and smarter to get the job done for the people of Lansing.

It takes a great team to build a great future and we are blessed to have that here in Lansing.

In the year ahead we will pursue innovative public-private partnerships that create new jobs, protect our environment, improve our neighborhoods and empower our youth, because these are the fundamental building blocks of our future.

I've often mentioned the importance of closing the distance between our two greatest economic assets – Michigan State University and the State Capitol. The Michigan Avenue Corridor that connects these two has the potential to spark even more new investment and new jobs.

In the year ahead we will launch an exciting new regional partnership to breathe new life into the corridor around the Frandor Shopping Center and the former Red Cedar Golf Course. Working with East Lansing, Lansing Township, Michigan State University and the business community, we will create a vibrant new gateway – our own Miracle Mile – at the key point where these communities come together.

As part of this initiative, we will reinvent the Red Cedar property as a new destination park that offers a variety of recreational activities for area residents. And we will partner with our innovative Drain Commissioner, Patrick Lindemann, to clean up the most polluted drain in Ingham County and keep millions of gallons of toxic runoff out of our rivers.

Great parks are important to our quality of life, and so are great neighborhoods. In the year ahead we will invest nearly \$25 million in our neighborhoods to fight the impact of foreclosures by improving our housing stock. We will repair houses that can be saved and demolish those that cannot, eliminating blighted properties that attract crime and diminish nearby property values.

I believe there is one more critical step that must be taken to help stabilize our neighborhoods. Tonight I call on our governor and our state lawmakers to quickly get behind Senator Hansen Clarke's proposal for a two-year freeze on mortgage foreclosures.

At a time when longtime homeowners are becoming the new homeless, we must take action to stop the dislocation of families who are struggling to make ends meet and stem the further erosion of property values.

While we work to build great neighborhoods, we are also working to build safer neighborhoods.

I'm proud of our record of standing behind the men and women of our police and fire departments, who keep our neighborhoods safe. For four straight years, we have kept every police officer and every firefighter on the job, even as other cities were laying them off.

We deployed state-of-the-art technology in our patrol cars to give our first responders the latest and best tools to keep our community safe. We've tasked our two newest Community Police Officers with keeping tabs on parolees returning to Lansing from the state prison system.

The results of our efforts are measurable and very positive – according to the Michigan State Police, crime in Lansing is down 16 percent. I am so proud of our public safety professionals and the work they do every day to keep us safe.

And yet for all we do, there are still too many young people with guns on our streets. Too many young men are settling their beefs with bullets instead of brains.

This Spring we will launch a new initiative called PEACE – Police Enforcement and Community Engagement. PEACE is a two-year pilot program that will take direct aim at the problem of youth violence and guns in the hands of kids by offering youngsters a chance to pull back from the brink and get back on track.

We'll use street-smart engagement strategies with young offenders that include peer-to-peer mentoring, after-school programs and work-study opportunities where they can get the skills – and the attitude – they will need to succeed.

Our partners in this initiative include Michigan State University, the Boys and Girls Club of Lansing and their director Carmen Turner, and my Office of Community and Faith-based Initiatives, led by Bishop David Maxwell.

In these uncertain times, the future of our young people is foremost in my mind. We must find a way to leave them with a better chance to succeed. We must leave them with a stronger city and a stronger state than we have now.

I remember growing up in Pontiac, where my Dad, who came over from Italy, worked in the family produce business, then went to work for General Motors. With my mom, they reared 5 kids. We weren't rich, but we weren't poor, either. We were a middle-class family who used good old-fashioned grit and determination to improve our lot in life, to reach for the American Dream.

The Michigan where I grew up was a state at the top. We were the leaders in almost every category – from education and environment to industry, arts and culture. Now we are on top of the wrong lists – unemployment, foreclosures, and people taking a one-way trip out of state.

We can and must do better. Bailouts and bonuses for Wall Street and baloney for Main Street just won't do. Partisan gridlock and indecision at our State Capitol won't do, either.

I see the failures of leadership in government, the anger and frustration felt by our citizens, the hopelessness that comes from having one's financial security torn apart. And I have to ask: will we be able to deliver for our children and grandchildren the same opportunities, the same shot at the American Dream that our parents gave to us?

The American Dream is under siege and Michigan is in the eye of the economic storm brought about largely by globalization and free trade. Too many Michigan families are feeling the walls close in around them as jobs are lost or threatened, homes are in jeopardy, college tuition rises and credit card interest rates are continually increased.

Now is the time when government at every level must weigh in on the side of working families!

Now is the time for us to stand together, not as Democrats or Republicans, but as Americans and proud Michiganders, to fight to put Michigan back on track. And Michigan can only be on the right track when our families are back on track.

To succeed where others have struggled, to overcome where others have been held down, yes, to make Michigan work again, we must have a different kind of vision, a different kind of leadership.

Wall Street is betting against us, but I am not. The brokers and the banksters have red-lined Michigan and manufacturing but we are fighting back.

Reviving the American Dream here in Michigan for us and our children will not be easy, but I believe we will do it. The very successes we have begun here in Lansing can become a model for all of Michigan. I believe we can harness the fight and determination shown by the people of Lansing and citizens all across this state.

Working together, we will build a future where our children and our families can continue to find and make success right here in Michigan.

My friends, we spent the past year celebrating our city's 150th birthday and the fact that the people of Lansing have always been pioneers. We've been leaders. We've been builders.

Today we are still pioneers, cutting a new path through some pretty thick brush to get to the next Lansing and the next Michigan.

We are still builders, harnessing every tool within our reach to create a more promising tomorrow.

The question is – are we still leaders? I believe we are.

But history will be the best judge of that. However it turns out, the decisions we make today will be the legacy we leave for tomorrow.

I want our legacy to be that of a tough group of folks who got together in the face of great adversity. Stuck in the eye of the storm, we kept our heads and used our wits to survive and thrive.

We put our shoulders to the wheel and got to work building a better future for ourselves, our children and our grandchildren.

I believe that will be our legacy, because we will build our own future, one brick at a time, one house at a time, one child at a time.

And when we work together, when we get everyone pulling in the same direction, we can overcome any and every challenge that stands in our way.

Because that's who we are.

We are leaders and builders, and together we will build a better future for Lansing and for Michigan that leaves no one behind.

Thank you, good night and God bless you.