

PRESS & GUIDE

Grand city service upgrades coming

Mayor outlines ambitious plans for Building Department at State of City

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PUBLISHED: February 22, 2009

Dearborn Mayor Jack O'Reilly's second State of the City Address Wednesday night at the Henry Ford Centennial Library covered a number of areas.

O'Reilly discussed promoting a "green" organization that practices recycling, energy and fuel efficiency and protects natural resources.

The Dearborn mayor talked of innovative and stronger partnerships with federal and state governments and especially Dearborn institutions.

O'Reilly also said Dearborn officials will develop new engines for economic activity, such as emerging alternative energy industries; housing, education and institutional projects in the city's east and west downtown; neighborhoods that offer modern options, such as larger lot sizes and open space; and the opening of a conference center.

"That's a big agenda," O'Reilly said, "but...progress on these fronts has begun so that Dearborn will prosper in both good and bad times.

"I know it's hard to talk about pushing forward when facing such difficult conditions. But our brightest dreams are generally conceived during our darker hours."

O'Reilly added city brass is busy recruiting new people representing different sectors of Dearborn's richly diverse community to serve on boards and commissions to facilitate the work of government.

Dearborn's mayor added he wants that work to be done with fresh perspectives, with an eye to the future, and without the fear of changing direction.

"That last part is tricky because I know criticism quickly follows when government alters its course," O'Reilly said. "But I would rather face that criticism than pursue a course I know will not meet our goals."

O'Reilly then went on to say he's gone in new directions several times with the city's Combined Sewer Overflow project, its paid-parking system and Dearborn's Public Service Day program.

But, O'Reilly said, his most ambitious change relates to the city's Building and Safety department. He said for a long time, he's felt city officials haven't been meeting service goals with the department and despite employees' best efforts, they've been undermined by a structure "that just didn't work."

With that, O'Reilly said, the city is going to change that structure with a proposed reorganization that will be built around the people Dearborn officials serve — its residential and business customers.

For too many years, O'Reilly said, city officials have blended the two groups despite their distinct needs, frustrating almost everybody.

"Our plans are to create a new Residential Services department," O'Reilly announced Wednesday night. "It will offer current and new residents the services they require to maintain and improve their properties.

"Our goal is to give (residential and business customers) the time and attention they deserve using tools and processes that will make it much more convenient to do business with us."

O'Reilly said city officials have already made a major improvement for people buying or selling a home in Dearborn. Through new technology, he said, city officials have converted hard-to-read and often confusing inspection reports to reports that are clear, printed and produced on site.

taken its lumps

FBI agents searched the Dearborn Building & Safety Department on June 12, after obtaining a warrant in U.S. District Court following allegations of bribery and fraud inside the department.

Prior to that, a former city building inspector pleaded guilty to bribery in 2007 after admitting he used his position as a city building inspector to solicit a bribe in return for a favorable inspection.

The city's less than one year old Neighborhood Stabilization Program will be an important focus of the new department, O'Reilly said Wednesday.

Since receiving approval from the Dearborn City Council in May 2008, the program has allowed the city to purchase marginal or undervalued foreclosed homes with the intention of reusing the property in ways that bolster the surrounding area. Dearborn will receive \$2.4 million in federal neighborhood stabilization funding, which comes from the Housing and Urban Development, in 2009 to continue this project.

The program combats the implications of increased foreclosures: an adverse affect on the city's housing market; a possible increase in crime; and an increase in municipal costs, including an increased burden on city services and lost property tax revenue. Foreclosures also affect values of surrounding properties.

A property purchased under the Neighborhood Stabilization Program may be demolished and resold as vacant land for housing development, provided the lot is at least 40 feet wide; demolished and sold to an adjacent property owner to create a single, larger lot; demolished, split and sold to property owners on both sides to be used as a side yard — perhaps allowing off-street parking where it doesn't exist — or to encourage redevelopment or expansion of existing homes; rehabilitated and resold or combined with other city-owned parcels, redeveloped or resold.

O'Reilly said no date has been set for the changes to take effect. He said the reorganization is being combined with physical moves throughout City Hall in order to group functions to improve customer convenience.

"Running (residents) around City Hall to get what you need is no longer acceptable," O'Reilly said.

The city will continue to offer other public services while the changes are being made, O'Reilly said. He said he wants to be careful to engineer a plan that doesn't allow any services to falter during the transition.

"I know they'll be hiccups. So I'm going to ask for your indulgence," O'Reilly said. "But in the end, we'll provide you superior public service as a customer of building and maintenance assistance.

"Well be a resource you can trust and one where you can expect to receive superior public service."