

The Saratogian (saratogian.com), Serving the Saratoga Springs, N.Y. region

Opinion

Reader's View: We can work together to face new challenges

Published: Sunday, February 1, 2009

My fellow Saratogians,

It was good to see some of you at the 2009 State of the City address I delivered last Sunday. It's now posted on the city Web site, at www.saratoga-springs.org, for public access.

As stated during the address, the tumultuous events of last year will hardly be missed. In these challenging times, the need for optimism and renewed attitude is perhaps unparalleled in recent history. I never lose sight of those among us that face extreme challenges, every day, just to make ends meet.

Fiscal conservatism must prevail, while we continue to enhance our quality of life as a vibrant and compassionate community. I'm proud the City Council worked together to overcome repeated fiscal challenges from the state and national economy. We held the line on taxes, with no increase. As I've often stated, the VLT revenue isn't guaranteed and is subject to risk yearly. Facing the loss of substantial VLT monies, many worthwhile capital projects, understandably, had to be deferred.

The decision to defer a project can't be viewed in a vacuum. The council has a fiduciary obligation to you, the public, to avoid wasteful spending of your hard-earned tax dollars. A prime example is the indoor recreation center. As I've often stated, this entire project, including all construction, was bonded years ago. We have since been paying all taxes involved. Opponents claim that building it now will cost the taxpayers more. One thing is certain: to now abandon the project will cost at least \$1 million taxpayers can never recoup. To waste such money is fiscal irresponsibility.

The present legal challenge to the rec center, brought by a small group of immediate neighbors, doesn't negate the fiscal sense in proceeding with the project. Anyone can file a lawsuit. It will be up to the court to ultimately decide the merits. I'm confident we're on sound legal footing and will prevail. The wishes of a few shouldn't outweigh the overwhelming community benefit.

Capital projects aren't the only challenges. As mayor, the charter places collective

bargaining of city union contracts in my hands, presently six of the seven contracts. Given that labor costs are \$30 million per year, of our \$36 million current budget, it's better to get it right than rush to resolution.

Historically, new contracts aren't reached for months beyond expiration, with the last police contract 10 months and the fire contract almost one year beyond their respective expiration dates. Every reasonable effort is being taken to advance negotiations in good faith, with opportunity for input from the city commissioners.

Additionally, we're working toward solving downtown parking and the public safety building needs. We just resolved the 2007 DEC investigation with business sense, while bringing significant environmental benefits back into the city. Much has happened in this first year.

By continuing to demand civility and professionalism, the council can meet your expectations. I will do my part. Acting responsibly and cooperatively, we can chart a better course for the public good.

Scott Johnson is mayor of the city of Saratoga Springs.