

In State of the City Address, Mayor Scott Johnson says Saratoga Springs' finances are improving, gives Saratoga Citizen a deadline for determining costs of charter change

Published: Sunday, January 23, 2011

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SARATOGA SPRINGS — “Stronger than most,” is how Mayor Scott Johnson characterized the position of Saratoga Springs as he delivered his third State of the City Address Sunday afternoon at the Saratoga Springs City Center.

The address was given overlooking Broadway, in a section of the second-story City Center addition recently built as part of the building’s nearly completed expansion. Johnson highlighted the project — along with the completion and opening of the Saratoga Springs Recreation Center and Spring Run Trail — as one of the city’s key achievements of 2010.

“Just look out the windows here today,” he said, motioning to the snowy city skyline. “This contribution to the future of Saratoga is undeniable.”

The mayor said the city’s finances are improving, citing several figures that show revenue brought into the city increased in 2010 in comparison to 2009, including a 10 percent increase in the number of homes sold and in the average sale price, a 9.6 percent increase in the hotel occupancy tax and a rising trend in sales tax.

“As we face our challenges, we should draw strength from what has long endured and produced what we enjoy today,” he said.

Calling Saratoga Springs “a small city with a big personality,” Johnson touched on many of the issues that impacted it in 2010, including paid parking, the development of Luther Forest Technology Campus in nearby Malta and ongoing negotiations with city unions on expired contracts, as well as his plan to contract with one health insurance provider.

He also spoke directly to the organizers of charter revision group Saratoga Citizen, who advocate for a change from the commission form of government to a council-manager system. Johnson told proponents of a proposed charter change referendum that they will need to furnish a fiscal note — a summary of the estimated cost of implementing the measure — before the council can decide whether or not the issue will be placed on the ballot.

“Without provision of such financial information, this council cannot reasonably perform its duties to the public at

large and satisfy our obligation to the city as elected officials,” he said, adding that a written formal request to the group for financial analysis will be delivered today and that the group will have until Jan. 31 to provide the information requested.

Johnson also called upon state officials to address and eliminate the “underlying dysfunction” that has characterized New York’s tax-and-spend budgeting mentality.

“We simply cannot continue without demanding relief from New York state on these unfunded state mandates that are literally choking us,” he said, adding that the state could not realistically entertain the idea of a property tax cap without first addressing those expenses.

Calling the thoroughbred horse racing industry “the core of our identity upon which our success is based and continues,” Johnson demanded the restoration of state funding for hosting video lottery terminals at Saratoga Casino and Raceway, recalling a recently passed resolution on the racing industry forwarded to state leaders.

He finished the speech with a series of statements beginning with the word “certainly,” a nod to the new economic reality faced by all municipalities over the past few years of fiscal uncertainty, and a quotation from Abraham Lincoln.

“Ideology separates us,” Johnson quoted. “Dreams and anguish bring us together.”

City residents in attendance were joined by Commissioners John Franck, Kenneth Ivins Jr., Anthony “Skip” Scirocco and Richard Wirth; city supervisors Joanne Yepsen and Matthew Veitch; Assemblyman Jim Tedisco and state Sen. Roy McDonald.