

State of the City: Mayor lays out priorities

Published: Wednesday, January 27, 2010

By PATRICK H. DONGES, The Saratogian



SARATOGA SPRINGS — Fiscal conservatism, economic uncertainty and clarity of vision were three broader points tackled by Saratoga Springs Mayor Scott Johnson at his second State of the City address Tuesday night. He described the city as "relatively strong" in the face of financial crisis.

Johnson outlined several initiatives designed to boost revenue while avoiding deeper cuts to services.

"At your first ceremony this year you were sworn in, tonight you might be sworn at," joked Saratoga County Chamber of Commerce President Joseph Dalton in his introduction.

One new proposal was a plan to offer building permit applicants a "private option."

The new option would allow applicants to choose from a list of city-approved private architects and engineers instead of having to adhere to the current submission process through the city.

"The applicants would still pay fees to the city in addition to those they would pay directly to private providers," Johnson said.

The mayor also introduced the exploration of sharing services with surrounding municipalities and Saratoga County.

"I'd be happy to work with the mayor on shared services," County Supervisor Matthew Veitch said.

Johnson cited the expansion of the Saratoga Springs City Center and construction on the GlobalFoundries "Fab 8" plant as bright points on the economic horizon.

"This venture is presently the largest economic venture in the country, if not the world," he said.

The continued comprehensive review of city zoning ordinance and the matching of the city's historic district with the national registry were noted as preparatory steps for the expected surge of activity following the opening of the computer chip plant.

As in last year's speech, Johnson urged the acceptance of paid parking as a source of revenue.

"I am not here today to state the present plan for parking will succeed," he said.

A committee formed in accordance with the 2010 city budget to address the issue met for the first time last week.

The committee has members appointed by city commissioners including president of the Adirondack Trust Company Charles V. Waite by Mayor Johnson, former Design Review Commission Chairman Patrick Kane by Public Works Commissioner Skip Scirocco, and Assistant Chief of Police Michael Biss by Public Safety Commissioner Richard Wirth.

Johnson stressed the need for a long-term parking plan that includes eventually building a parking structure on city-owned property. The \$1.35 million in revenue expected to be generated by public parking is already written into the 2010 budget.

"If revenue is not generated to match that budgeted through paid parking, the city's deficit will increase and result in more spending cuts, with less services and potentially more layoffs before year's end," Johnson said.

City Council members were generally pleased with the speech.

"You learn from the mistakes of the past," Commissioner Wirth said. "Before, there wasn't full communication on the council."

Finance Commissioner Kenneth Ivins Jr. said the council would "explore everything possible to save taxpayers money" when asked about sharing services with the county.

"It was OK," Commissioner Scirocco said of the address.

Scirocco was at odds with the council on Jan. 19 after being denied payroll transfers that would've restored clerical employees cut from his office in the 2010 budget.

"At my department, we're trying to work smarter, not harder," Scirocco said.

Johnson quoted author C.S. Lewis and Franklin D. Roosevelt, and ended with a quote by Ronald Reagan.

"The future doesn't belong to the faint hearted," Johnson said, "it belongs to the brave."