

Inaugural Address

State of the City

June 13, 2005

This is the 37th inaugural ceremony of the Dallas City Council since our citizens created the council-manager form of government in 1931.

And while it is certain that each ceremony has been a bit of an emotional rollercoaster – bittersweet for those who are departing, exhilarating for those newly joining – I am compelled to point out, before I summarize our recent accomplishments and help set the tone for the challenges and opportunities to come, that with THIS inauguration we are ALL bittersweet.

For today we lose four tenured council members – a first since we adopted the 14- 1 system of single member districts. Together they represent 32 years of City Council service – 69 years if you include their prior City Hall experience as homeowner advocates and members of city boards and commissions.

I can assure everyone today that these four council members, each of whom have become the council's go-to experts in areas of great importance to our city –

transportation, historic preservation, affordable housing, and the environment – will be openly missed at many city council meetings to come.

So if John Loza, Sandy Greyson, Veletta Forsythe Lill, and Lois Finkelman would please stand, I would like for us to thank them properly for their long and distinguished service.

As one of our new colleagues, Angela Hunt, told me this week: “There couldn’t be a more exciting time to get elected to the Dallas City Council.”

We agree.

By the time of our next inauguration in 2007, America’s ninth largest city will look different. Feel different. And be talked about differently.

A 40-story-tall, bright-white suspension bridge – the Margaret Hunt Hill Bridge, and the only one of its kind in this country – will be coming out of the ground in the Trinity River bottoms, stunningly connecting downtown to West Dallas.

Underneath that bridge, digging will begin for the two large lakes that are the centerpiece of the Trinity River Project. That dirt will be mounded on either side of the river to raise the height of the river levees by two feet and

will serve as the platform for the new downtown Trinity Parkway.

The city's Visitor Center in the Great Trinity Forest - that 7,000-acre wood south of downtown that we don't go to now unless we're dumping something illegally - will be under construction, too. And the Audubon Society will be busy creating the programming and exhibits that families will see inside the center and in the woods around it starting in 2009.

Downtown will look much different too. The first new residential tower built on Main Street since the Manor House was built in the 1940s will be open - the 16-story Third Rail Lofts with parking garage and retail.

The first new OFFICE tower construction in downtown Dallas since 1986 will be completed - the new 24-story corporate headquarters building for 7-11 Corp., whose Grand Plaza and front-door fountains will be a fitting bookend for the grand dame at the other end of Flora Street, the Dallas Museum of Art.

Most spectacularly, as thousands of new office tenants - and the condominium owners who will live above them - bring an exciting new dimension to our museum and music venues, the Dallas Independent School District will be putting the finishing touches on the dramatically upgraded Booker T. Washington School for the Visual and Performing Arts and next door, the Winspear Opera House and the Wyly Theater will be rising out of the ground,

making our Arts District not only the largest, but the most architecturally significant in the country.

The W Hotel will be open at Victory. As will Joule, the hot new boutique hotel and spa a few steps from downtown Neiman Marcus. And the Ritz-Carlton Hotel and Residences, next to the Crescent, will be about to open its doors.

But that's just a small taste of what will be different about downtown.

Today, there are two DOZEN downtown buildings that are either currently undergoing transformation from office to residential, or are about to be. What the locals here in Dallas may not realize is that downtown Dallas real estate is finally hot property.

Larry and Ted Hamilton, the energetic father-son duo from Denver, have completed two major building redos – the Davis Building and the Dallas Power & Light buildings – and have single-handedly made it possible for us to use the words “downtown” and “hip” in the same sentence.

Joe Sapp from San Diego has bought three vacant office buildings downtown. He not only thinks downtown Dallas is the hottest urban real estate market in the country right now, but has done us a great personal favor by putting under contract LAST WEEK the ugly turquoise office building at 211 N. Ervay next to Thanksgiving Square, which he plans to strip down and spiff up into a sleek new

apartment building without a NICKEL of tax subsidy. My kind of guy.

And then there's The Merc. As we fondly refer to the Mercantile Bank complex, built in 1943, vacant since 1989.

These four buildings, comprising one entire city block in the middle of Main Street, long an eyesore and a blight, have been the No. 1 stumbling block to a truly reinvigorated downtown Dallas.

Thank you to Forest City, the national development firm based in Cleveland, for sticking with an impossibly complicated project. Thank you to Atmos Energy for saving the taxpayers millions of dollars on this project by generously DONATING another, much more attractive, block of office buildings nearby that Forest City will also be turning into residential. And thank you to my colleagues, Mitchell Rasansky, Don Hill, and Ed Oakley for flying to Washington two weeks ago with myself and City Manager Mary Suhm to put the stake in the ground and salvage that deal.

That bold and decisive move, in my opinion, has set the stage and tone for the next two years for the Dallas City Council.

Putting a stake in the ground of our city. Acting on the vision. Applying laser-like focus. Demanding change and dramatic physical improvements for our citizens to see and be proud of.

With downtown firmly on the move – bolstered significantly by the creation last week of a new \$125 million tax increment finance district and a Downtown Dallas Management Association – the Dallas City Council will focus on the five top priorities set by the Council in January 2004 – Economic Development and Housing, Staff Accountability, Neighborhood Quality of Life, Public Safety, and the Trinity River.

To ensure that focus on these five goals, the council recently pared its NINE city council committees to six, established Economic Development as a stand-alone department and added 16 positions and \$1 million to its annual budget.

Two of our priorities stand out for immediate and crisp attention.

One: Economic Development in the Southern Sector

The tremendous progress we are making downtown and with the Trinity River Project will make this easier to accomplish than ever before. Plus, there is urgency to the issue, which has galvanized the City Council. Today, we sit here in 100 percent agreement that the incessant, wildfire growth of the suburban communities to our north has made it imperative for Dallas to push back strongly with new housing, retail, manufacturing, office and business park developments in that half of our city which is not only the most beautiful but is open and available for business.

One of the most important things we learned from the pro bono work that McKinsey and Company did for us last year – work that was guided and embraced by councilmembers Don Hill, John Loza, and Gary Griffith – was that we had to change our strategy when it came to southern sector development.

First, we had to write it down. Write down the vision. But we could no longer paint the southern sector with a broad brush – it’s too big, McKinsey told us, it has different needs, different neighborhoods, different aspirations.

Indeed.

Ask Don Hill about his aspirations for Central Oak Cliff and he will tell you that first and foremost it is Southwest Center Mall – perfectly located at the corner of two major highways, surrounded by residents with strong buying power, but severely hampered – like many malls around the country – with a 30-year-old obsolete product that must be demolished in part or in whole and modernized.

Southwest Center Mall is to Oak Cliff what The Merc is to downtown: a critical economic development piece that City Hall is putting a stake in the ground to save.

James Fantroy has a vision for Southeast Dallas – and he’s pushed it successfully, carefully nurturing our perfectly located but vastly underutilized airport, Dallas

Executive Airport. Today, thanks to Mr. Fantroy, its new more serious name is bringing serious change – millions of dollars worth of terminal and runway improvements, new aviation tenants, and 500 acres of land next to it, ripe for aviation- related development.

Another piece of the vision for Southeast Dallas will break ground this summer thanks to the fierce dedication of Mr. Fantroy, UNT Chancellor Lee Jackson and state Sen. Royce West . . . the first \$25 million building of the new University of North Texas at Dallas campus near Interstate 20 and Houston School Road.

And next legislative session, in 2007, we will call on all citizens of our city to lobby the Dallas delegation of the Texas House of Representatives to authorize the creation of the first public law school in Dallas to be built in our beautiful Beaux Arts municipal courthouse in downtown as part of the University of North Texas System. This past session, Sen. West easily convinced the Texas Senate to pass a bill to authorize this new school, but we were unable to move the bill in the House.

It will be our first priority next session for two reasons: It is an integral piece of our downtown redevelopment package with Forest City and our proposed Main Street Park; and it is a much-needed stepping stone for our Dallas young people who cannot afford our city's private law school, Southern Methodist University, for law school.

Dr. Maxine Thornton-Reese has a clear vision, too. She wants the Lancaster-Kiest Shopping Center to be totally redone to look like Mockingbird Station, filled with shops and restaurants and residential. And why not? It's achievable – and needed. Lancaster-Kiest is on the DART rail line, just like Mockingbird Station. It is located on busy thoroughfares, like Mockingbird Station, close to residential neighborhoods and major hospitals. The economic drivers are there – we need the focus and dedication to make it happen.

Steve Salazar envisions what will happen in 2008 when people drive over the new Santiago Calatrava-designed, Margaret Hunt Hill suspension bridge into West Dallas. People will come from all over the world to see our Trinity River bridges, which will connect the northern and southern hemispheres of our city in a striking new way. But it is our job – starting TODAY – to make sure the new economic development that will spring from their creation is equally bold and dramatic on both sides of the river. And that people who drive over the bridge into West Dallas and Oak Cliff have a reason to stay – and eat and play and shop.

Ed Oakley and Dr. Elba Garcia are already teaming up to do just that in the Oak Cliff Gateway – and the historic Lake Cliff Condominium Tower now under renovation is the first great example of the kind of development that was envisioned by the Urban Land Institute five years ago.

Bill Blaydes, who is not a Southern Sector councilmember, but knows, as we all do, where our

Economic Development priorities are, is leading our city council effort to create an Inland Port in the Southeastern part of the city. Encouraged by the Port of Houston and the coastal City of Manzanillo, Mexico, this Inland Port could become a central distribution facility for ship containers that are currently off-loading at the docks of our region's coastal cities. Enormous opportunities are within our grasp, especially when they are combined with the Union Pacific Railroad expansion of its Intermodal Truck/Rail facilities at Interstates 20 and 45.

Leo Chaney continues to champion the South Dallas area – home to our precious collection of Art Deco buildings at Fair Park, our city's best jazz at the South Dallas Cultural Center, a host of exemplary public schools, and the hands-down, most exciting public-private collaboration in our city – the teardown and revitalization of the Frazier Courts Housing Project and its environs, master-planned by the world-renowned urban planner Antonio Dimambro.

But South Dallas is also home to our lowest income citizens who suffer the highest unemployment and underemployment rates in our city and endure the ravages of crime, drugs, prostitution, homelessness, lack of code enforcement, nonexistent retail, and depressed property values.

Which brings us to our second top priority for this council: Crime.

We have a great police chief in David Kunkle. He is intense, fair, and hard-working. He has made excellent choices in his command staff. Morale is dramatically higher than it was just a year ago, when he was hired. And he has significantly raised the bar when it comes to hiring eligibility. The City Council has done an Efficiency Study of the police department, raised taxes to hire new officers, purchased new equipment, clamped down on slum apartment complexes, and breathed new life into the Dallas Police Reserve Program.

We have a clear goal: We don't want to be the No.1 crime city in America any more – in cities with over a million people.

Getting rid of that designation will not happen overnight. As we are reminded by the media on a regular basis, even if we dropped our overall crime rate by 20 percent this year, we would still be locked in the No.1 spot.

But by keeping our eye firmly on our goal, we will be a safer city. The chief has made Public Enemy No.1 guns and drugs. He has set a goal of reducing overall crime by 10 percent, and homicide by 20 percent, by the end of this year. And while we are a long way from meeting those goals – as of Friday, we were only 2.8 percent lower than last year overall, and we were 21 percent higher in murders – you can be certain that our City Manager Mary Suhm, City Attorney Thomas Perkins, Police Chief, and City Council are doing everything possible to make our city safer.

We must continue to hire more officers to patrol our streets – to get us closer to the three officers-per-1,000-citizens goal established by a previous City Council. We must continue to spend money on equipment that will keep our officers safe and on the same par, in terms of vehicles and firepower, as our criminals. Just last Friday, Chief Kunkle announced a new crime-fighting program called Operation Disruption that should make our most dangerous neighborhoods safe.

The No. 1 impediment to our No. 1 priority of Economic Development is unsafe streets and neighborhoods. We know it, and we are doing something about it.

For the last seven months, we have spent an inordinate amount of time focused on another issue entirely – that of governance, specifically whether Dallas should move to a strong mayor form of government as crafted by a group of private citizens who wanted change.

Citizens did not want that version of change – and voted to turn it down resoundingly. And while I was disappointed with that outcome, I congratulate my colleagues for mounting a strong and unified campaign that brought together unlikely factions of our city and inspired people who are typically UNINSPIRED by City Hall to cast their vote and be heard on a very important issue.

This coming Wednesday, the City Council – with its four new members – will have its first discussion about the charter changes that the previous council promised to put on the November ballot. Which, I believe, WILL be on the ballot. Along with a single bond proposition to fund a new 24-hour-a-day homeless assistance facility in downtown Dallas.

It will be an important election. It will not change the form of government that we have today, but my colleagues have spent an enormous amount of time putting together a package of reforms that they believe will make City Hall run more efficiently. And I look to them to strike the right balance for change, which will hopefully be embraced by the voters.

Regardless of the outcome of the election, however, the drumbeat inside City Hall will be that of CHANGE.

It began with a sober and disturbing look at City Hall by Booz-Allen and The Dallas Morning News. It continued with an analysis we commissioned at City Hall from McKinsey and Company – and again we thank you for doing that work at no charge to the city.

But the real impetus for change comes not from outside forces but from the citizens – from the people who pay the freight and demand value for their dollars.

They want the city codes to be enforced – when you say no panhandling, get rid of panhandlers. When you say

you are going to make people take care of their properties, DO IT. When you say you're going to raise people's property taxes to reduce crime, show us the reduction. And how you spent our money.

Your City Manager Mary Suhm hears you – and is dedicated to better customer service, a responsive 311 system, performance benchmarks for employees, and shorter lines whether you need a building permit or just want to pay a speeding ticket.

Your City Attorney Tom Perkins hears you.

Your City Council and Your Mayor hear you.

As Angela Hunt, Ron Natinsky, Linda Koop, Pauline Medrano and the rest of your Dallas City Council says: “There couldn't be a more exciting time to be elected to the Dallas City Council.”

We wholeheartedly agree.