



STATE OF THE CITY 2009

Welcome everyone, and thank you for attending the 2009 Hamtramck State of the City address. Your presence here is testimony to your engagement in our community, and we are all the richer for it. Hamtramck has always been the kind of city which inspires people's loyalties and passion. We need both, from all of you. There is much work to be done here, and each and every one of you has a part to play in the project of creating the kind of city, and the kind of world, that we all want this to be--a place that will allow us all a full and fulfilling life, that recognizes and encourages our talents, that rewards our accomplishments, and that protects our rights.

I don't have to tell you that we are living on a roller coaster. But I am here to remind you of some of the mountains we've climbed in the last year, to warn you about some of the obstacles we still face, and to prepare you for some pretty exciting times ahead. And, despite so many uncertainties, I mean that in a good way.

When we gathered at this time last year, we were excited about the prospect of hiring a new city manager. Bill Cooper has now been on the job almost a year, and he has made an enormous difference in how city hall operates. It has become much easier for all of us to do our jobs, to get information and to see constructive action taken, so I'd like to take this opportunity to thank Bill for his work. No doubt Bill will tell you this job was much more than he'd bargained for. But I'm sure he means THAT in a good way.

There's a lot to tell you about, but let me start with information about something that's on everyone's mind, and that's the financial stability of our city. We've gone through so much together, finally coming out of seven long years of state oversight of our finances only a year and a half ago. With careful management--and I must here commend Finance Director Nevrus Nazarko for his expertise and his prudence--we've started to correct some systemic problems, pay down our outstanding debt, and even managed to expand some city services while still ending the year with a modest surplus. That is more than many cities can say nowadays. Property tax rates have consistently declined over the last three years and we've managed to keep the same rate for the upcoming budget year, despite declining property values. Under normal circumstances, we'd have cause for some cautious celebration. But these are not normal circumstances.

The general economic downturn is leaving its mark in our budgeted revenue collections.. The American Axle strike and the company's scaled down operations cost the city about \$250,000 last year, and will have a much larger effect in the coming year, as all remaining operations are scheduled to migrate to the Detroit segment of the plant. We have been assured by company officials that equipment will not be removed from the Hamtramck facilities, which would have an even larger effect on our budget. But as we all know, there are no assurances in this economy, and the prospect of further loss of income from what has been until now our second largest source of general fund revenue is truly frightening.

What is more, the City of Hamtramck faces another immediate budgetary challenge involving the funding of our MERS retirement system, which has been negatively affected by the decline



in the value of its investments. While this is an issue not as outwardly dramatic as plant closings, its impact on our budget in the next year could be enormous.

We are not the only community caught between the business downturn and declining property values and incomes. I just came from the Michigan Suburbs Alliance yearly meeting, in which we were warned that, unless the State legislature authorizes another revenue stream for its municipalities, within two years dozens of our cities will be simply unsustainable.

We are already looking at creative solutions in the City of Hamtramck that will allow us to improve our city services--services our residents need and deserve--while maintaining the fiscal stability we've struggled so hard to establish. But this will take all our cooperation and ingenuity, our good will and fortitude, and it may not be a pretty process. No one knows how long the nation's economy will struggle, and how it will be reshaped along the way. But the simple truth is that, while the ground may be shakey around us, as a community we will need to keep grounded, to be flexible, and to help support each other. This I know we can do.

The fact is, we can take heart in many projects, great and small, that are combining to make life better for Hamtramck residents. We continue to draw nearer to a close in the four-decades long R-31 case. Ninety-six new homes have been built so far. But with the disappointing housing market, we are hoping to shift tactics and, with the help of Wayne County and MSHDA (the Michigan State Housing Development Authority), with funding through the Neighborhood Stabilization Program and other sources, instead acquire and rehab one hundred houses throughout the city to complete our requirements under the consent decree. In a separate project, we are working on county funding to demolish forty-five derelict houses. There currently number a little over 400 vacant or abandoned homes in the City. The city has taken steps to help struggling homeowners through efforts like the foreclosure workshops organized with the help of MSHDA. But we are also continuing to aggressively pursue property owners whose neglect of their property endangers the safety and quality of life of our neighborhoods and the viability of our city. With the advent of warm weather we are once again mowing not only our city-owned lots, but overgrown private property, with the charge added to the the owner's tax roll. And year round, of course, we are boarding up derelict buildings. Our code enforcement personnel are out every day, and if you are the one who gets a ticket for weeds or graffitt or some other issue, please understand that we are working to hold the line on blight and the deterioration of our neighborhoods and businesses. It's in all of our interest--in terms of safety, property values, and healthy spirits--that we each do our part.

We currently have eighteen active cases filed with Wayne County for nuisance abatement. Within the past year fifteen properties have been demolished either through nuisance abatement or the Land Bank of Michigan. We are in the process of compiling the next list of burned out and boarded properties, probably between twenty and thirty, for submission to Wayne County for abatement. We are also monitoring properties previously on the list, and reinserting them in the program as necessary. I know that on my block alone, we have at least eight vacant homes, in states ranging from well-maintained to disgraceful. It is a lot to get a handle on, but it is the duty of government, property owners, and neighbors working together to solve these issues.



On a related note, while our street sign replacement program, now two years old, ended up running into unanticipated problems, it is back on track with a new company so that all new street signs are projected to be installed by the end of this month. I know it will be a relief for everyone to see this frustrating situation resolved.

We have been working closely with MDOT on several road projects. Last year we were happy to see repairs completed to our bridges over I-75, especially the Caniff Avenue bridge. Over the coming year the next stage of improvements, including the installation of new fencing and landscaping, will help provide a welcoming gateway to our city. A \$580,000 Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality grant through MDOT will also allow us to improve and update traffic signals on Caniff from Lumpkin to Buffalo.

And speaking of our streets, basic chip and seal surface and pothole repair will continue, and street sweeping which was started in 2008 will continue in 2009 with the addition of a second sweeping of residential streets.

Hamtramck streets will also become safer for our students this fall with the laying of new sidewalks, mounting of speed monitors and signage, and the implementation of safety programs, made possible by a \$947,000 grant through the Safe Routes to Schools program. Special thanks need to go to Councilman Scott Klein for spearheading the grant process, to Aswan Almakary and ACCESS for gathering the data and putting the grant together, and to Superintendent Tom Niczay and all our participating schools. We know this construction will cause some inconvenience, and we thank you as well for your commitment to making this work for the good of all our students. Our police department is also working directly with the Hamtramck Public School District to head off the long-time problem of after-school tensions.

In terms of public safety, we should be very proud of the quick response record of both our police and fire departments. Under newly-appointed chief Steve Paruk we are working to support our fire department with new equipment, which everyone knows is very expensive. A new fire engine is being built to spec and should be delivered in August. Grants are in progress for other replacement equipment as well, and even for a new fire station.

We would also like to thank Interim Police Chief Ron Mathias for stepping up and doing a professional job under what were often difficult circumstances. The City Manager expects to complete the process of appointing a new chief, Marek Kalinowski, within the coming week. The traffic program has been so successful that we've been able to add another officer, and we've worked hard to keep our department fully staffed. But as the economy has worsened, crime, particularly assault and battery and burglary, has predictably but unfortunately increased. Some of these numbers may be a product of increased reporting, as our Weed and Seed Program and its non-profit arm the Hamtramck Community Initiative have matured. The HCI continues to organize block clubs and explore new opportunities for neighborhood empowerment. I hope that each of you will become involved in your local block clubs and neighborhood watch efforts. Street by street, these groups are fighting blight, removing graffiti, planting community gardens, and taking back their blocks. It's a continuing struggle, sometimes discouraging, often inspiring, and an example of how each household, each person, contributes to the quality of life of our city.



I encourage you--watch out for each other. Pay attention to who's walking down your street. Know your neighbors, and call the police immediately if something doesn't look right.

As we turn attention to guaranteeing that Hamtramck is a pleasant and safe place, the Downtown Development Authority will soon be installing four security cameras on Joseph Campau between Holbrook and Caniff, and in the Shoppers World municipal parking lot. The cameras will be wirelessly connected to screens and a recording device at our police station, and form the first phase of what we hope will be an expanding program.

The DDA has been very active, under the leadership of new Downtown Manager Darren Grow, who's been on the job since January. There are plans to work with business owners, and with Judge Paruk and the 31st District Court, to refill and maintain planter boxes and replant trees along Jos. Campau, and to cooperate with the Weed and Seed program in graffiti removal. Last year I'm sure we all enjoyed the holiday lights that made the street more festive, and this program as well as the holiday window display contest in December will continue. Also continuing are the quarterly merchants meetings, with plans for a business openhouse and an event coordinated with the Weed and Seed business incubator that will bring together potential entrepreneurs and business owners with property owners and brokers.

In the last year Mainstreet Restaurant, Piast Institute, Botsford Collision and Campau Botsford Service Station have renovated their facades, and Golani Family Dentistry and Whiskey in the Jar are in the process of doing the same, with the help of the DDA's Facade Improvement Grant. There are also exciting new plans being explored, with the cooperation of the Department of Community and Economic Development and MSHDA, to provide complimentary wi fi to the downtown district and to eventually provide fiber optic, state of the art band width for help in attracting cutting edge businesses.

In cooperation with the DDA and the Department of Community and Economic Development, our new Events Coordinator, Eve Doster Knepp, has also been doing an outstanding job of planning and marketing for the city. The International Bazaar, held on the last Saturday of the month, May through September, was launched last year and is expanding this year to coordinate with other business promotions. Thanks to Eve and to our crack team of dedicated volunteers, you may also have noticed that this year's Countdown to Paczki Day and Paczki Day itself were the biggest and most successful ever. Look for a continued expansion around this event, which is rapidly becoming a Detroit-wide holiday, judging by all the people who took a Tuesday off work to come down for a Hamtramck-style party. Look for some tweaking of our Labor Day Festival as well, with more emphasis on the ethnic diversity for which Hamtramck is famous. These and other initiatives, including the many city tours organized by Greg Kowalski of our Historical Commission and by the Piast Institute, are aimed at bringing visitors into our city, some for the very first time, and introducing them to the excitement of an old-style city neighborhood, to our vibrant street life, our institutions, and our businesses.

Among the many new faces around city hall in the past year is Jason Friedmann, who became Director of Community and Economic Development in September. Jason has been working on many fronts, including updating our website, creating an inventory of properties and updated



marketing materials and incentive packages for developers, and presenting development opportunities at professional conferences and meetings.

While we've heard a lot of bad news about restructuring and employee losses at GM and American Axle, our small businesses continue to grow. The past year, on average, the city has seen seven to ten new businesses open each month, ranging from a new yoga studio on Jos Campau to Al-Jenah Bakery on Conant (which reminds me, we're very happy to see the innovative renovation of the Zen Center, along with its expanded cafe.) At the same time, we've been saddened to see the departure of some long-standing Hamtramck institutions: Henry the Hatter, the Holbrook Cafe, and of course the Hamtramck Citizen. Happily, the Henry the Hatter storefront is home to a new office, the Holbrook Cafe site is undergoing significant redevelopment that will offer gourmet food, clothing, office supplies, and office space. And a new weekly newspaper, the Hamtramck Review, is now being published.

While the Shopper's World project fell through, as sometimes happens in the world of business development, we have an opportunity to work together with the community to encourage a development on this site that is good for everyone. A Michigan State University project resulted in numerous concepts for this site which provide a good starting point for a reimagined development. We are pursuing other potential buyers, and we are a step ahead because environmental assessment is complete.

We've been hearing a lot from Washington and from Lansing about green development, and several industrial sites in Hamtramck are under consideration by green companies: including the Sherwin Williams city-owned property, as well as the Missant and BASF sites. We are cautiously optimistic about these and other projects that remain in the pipeline.

One project that is coming to fruition before our eyes, however, is the brand new Department of Human Services building going up on the old Woody Pontiac site. The Woody Pontiac building was demolished, you'll remember, thanks to a grant from MSHDA, and our own Brownfield Redevelopment Authority approved the plan through which the project was awarded brownfield tax credits. This is just one of many examples of the cooperative intergovernmental relationships the city has cultivated, as well as the continuing professionalization of our own operations, which allow us to take advantage of every available tool to tap sources of expertise and funding. The office, which will provide 200 jobs, is on track to open in November. We are especially hopeful as this facility is spurring additional interest in the north end of Jos. Campau, which has already seen the opening of several new businesses this year, with many more in the works.

And I might remind everyone that plans are continuing for the long-awaited Hausner redevelopment on Jos. Campau and Belmont, and that the Mitchell Street townhouse project is back on track after some delays and readjustment. But coming back to the DHS office, it's one of many projects facilitated through the assistance of Governor Granholm's Cities of Promise team for Hamtramck, for which we are very grateful. Another is the creation of a new Master Plan for this city, which will incorporate Parks and Recreation and Arts and Culture Plans and an Economic Development Strategy. This plan will guide the direction of our future development. We are also quite excited about opportunities to plug Hamtramck into developing plans for regional mass transit. The new Transit Master Plan adopted in January 2009 gives first priority to



lines along Woodward and Gratiot, but places Hamtramck on an important commuter line linking Detroit to Port Huron by the year 2020. This could mean dramatic changes in the development of the South end of town where a potential station would be located.

We are also close to finalizing a contract for the administration of a \$400,000 Brownfield Assessment Grant. The funding will be used to educate the public and development community, and to identify, complete environmental assessments, and promote the redevelopment of property throughout the city.

There are a few other initiatives I want to mention: The 2010 Census is coming up, and Virginia Skrzyniarz of the Piast Institute is spearheading the city's Complete Count Committee. You will soon be hearing much more about this committee, and some of you in this room will be asked to serve, as we get the message out that it's vital that the city population be accurately counted for many reasons, not the least of which is because our funding opportunities often depend on our population. It's fundamental to understand that US census data by law may not be shared with other agencies, and that it is in all of our interest that every person staying in every household, temporarily or permanently, be counted, regardless of age, regardless of family relationship, regardless of citizenship status. We know that Hamtramck, like many immigrant communities, has been undercounted in the past, and we need to make sure that we are accurately represented in the future.

I also haven't forgotten that I may have lured some of you here on false pretenses. I promised a surprise announcement today, and, as so often happens in government, I find that we're not quite at the place where all the i's are dotted and the t's crossed. But I can tell you that, when Governor Jennifer Granholm's Cities of Promise program was initiated in Hamtramck several years ago, like all the targeted cities we chose a signature project--a single project that would be our showpiece. In those years the Cities of Promise team has been of invaluable support to us, opening many doors in Lansing, helping us build working relationships across the State of Michigan, facilitating opportunities for assistance, and helping us navigate sometimes convoluted processes. Through the intrepid advocacy of this team, I'm happy to say this much: we are now in very serious negotiation with DTE to secure a building for our Signature Project, the Hamtramck Historical Museum. As you know, this is a cause dear to my heart, as an historian and archivist. I expect the remaining steps to proceed relatively quickly, and to be able to come back to you with more exciting details very soon. I'm very excited about these developments, and you will be, too.

There are many other initiatives I'd like to be able to detail for you: the Hatch Hamtramck Art Collective renovation and reuse of the old police station; hopes for a new home for H-CAT, the Hamtramck Cat Assistance Team; films and television shows--independent and mainstream--that have been shot here in town; the unfailing contribution of our many nonprofits which not only assist our residents but also partner with the city on so many projects; the commission and committee members who by their willingness to serve ensure that the processes of government run smoothly and fairly and that resources are tapped for the projects that contribute so much to our quality of life and community spirit.



It is this spirit that I'd like to talk about most of all. Because if there's one thing we can say about our little city, it's that it is not just an exit off I-75. It is a community, from which its residents derive a special identity. Whether you were born and raised here, whether you came here from another town or another state, whether you arrived here from across a far ocean, this city has a way of becoming your home town. I've said many times that everywhere I go, I meet people with a connection to Hamtramck, even if they never lived here themselves. For many of them, it is what immigrants call "the old country," the homeland of their ancestors. We share an identity. And it comes from this place.

That is why you are here, and that is why I can appeal to you to take ownership of your property, your street, your neighborhood, and your city. I hear myself griping more than I like sometimes, which also seems to be part of Hamtramck culture, so I'm especially glad to have this opportunity to tell you that, in the face of the challenges we share with the rest of Michigan and so much of the country, I see things going on every day in Hamtramck that make me proud of our city, and give me great hope. Yesterday I attended the Mayors Millennial Congress of the Michigan Suburbs Alliance, where elected officials and young people from each community discussed how to create a "culture of opportunity" in their cities. What I have seen in Hamtramck, especially in the last year, suggests to me that our residents, especially our younger generation, are not waiting for permission, but seizing their own opportunities to make things happen. They are looking at the gaps in our community--those challenges that still need addressing but are difficult for municipalities to tackle, because of budgetary or personnel constraints, lack of will, or failure of imagination--and finding creative ways to solve them.

While the city can point to its big projects, so much of the work of sustainable community building that I see blossoming all around me is coming from the ground up, from people who realize that they have a stake in the well-being of their community, and that they and their neighbors have the power to make real, visible change. Whether it's the enthusiastic young folks at Real Church setting up games in the parks and handing out hot dogs to the neighborhood kids; whether it's folks like Mitch Cope and Gina Reichert saving houses and saving neighborhoods, and inspiring others to come here and do the same--like Ian Perotta of Habitat for Hamtramck, who is here today; whether it's a resident like Angel Profitt putting together a monthly recycling opportunity that has grown into a full-fledged commission with a city-adopted recycling plan; whether it's a block club creating a community garden; look around--these projects and so many more are sprouting up down your block and on your corner. They are reshaping our neighborhoods, and should inspire us all to reimagine the role we can play in our community. They are visible testimony that we are not passive victims of economic or political or social forces over which we have no control, but agents charged with creating the kind of city in which we want to live--a home town that provides an outlet for the development of our talents and the fulfillment of our potential, and that protects the rights of each and every one of us.

Last year I gave you some suggestions for connecting to and helping create community. They hold just as true today. They are simple suggestions, not too troublesome, and even fun: Plant some flowers--better yet, plant a tree; our streets will look a lot more beautiful and your house will stay cooler in the summer. Grow some tomatoes and share them with your neighbor. Sweep the street in front of your house once a week. Once a week, check out one local store or restaurant that you've never been to before, and buy something there, however small. Spend your



money locally whenever possible. Leave your car at home and walk up to Campau. Check a book out of the Hamtramck Public Library. Sit on your front porch one hour a week, and say hello to everyone who walks by. Learn to say hello in the language of your next door neighbor. Join your local block club. Go to a community event like the Taste of Hamtramck or a school band concert or a Hatch art opening. Attend a city council meeting. Vote.

It is work of the imagination, of the intellect, of the heart, and certainly of the hands. It is hard work, sometimes daunting, this creating a better world. But it is satisfying and meaningful work. And if you look around, you'll also see that there are a lot of people just looking for a way to help. Offer them that chance. This is the saving grace of our city, and rather than diminishing in hard times, we can all see it proliferating. There's been a lot of talk lately about how, here in Michigan, we know how to build things. Nowhere has that been more true than in Hamtramck, created out of the opportunities offered just down the street at Dodge Main. Now, even as auto manufacturing faces an uncertain future, our future as a city is still being reimagined and reconstructed, by the combined efforts of oldtimers and newcomers, older folks like me--it hurts to say it--and a younger generation full of enthusiasm and the will to make a difference. That's what brought people here one hundred years ago. That's what brought me here. And that's what continues to bring people here from all over the world. Let that reinvigorated "culture of opportunity" continue to inspire us to take charge of our little piece of the world, here in our little village. Let it inspire all of us together to help build something GREAT in Hamtramck.