

State Of The City Address – Mayor William M. Manzi III
Methuen Board of Trade Meeting February 11, 2010

Let me begin by thanking Karen Broscoe and The Methuen Board of Trade for hosting this great event again this year. The Methuen Board of Trade excels in bringing the business community together, and this year's Senior Center event is proof positive that the Board's important mission is being fulfilled.

Congratulations to new City Council President Jack Cronin. I look forward to working with you and the entire City Council in a positive manner over the next year.

I would like to express my thanks to all of the men and women who serve in the United States military, especially our Methuen residents on active duty. Words cannot express our gratitude for your service.

In this, my fifth year addressing this body, Methuen, our State, and our Nation continue to face the greatest economic challenges since the Great Depression. As I said last year, those challenges will require new thinking, shared sacrifice, and a willingness to tackle problems that for too long have been deferred.

These problems have not stopped us from making great progress in the past four years, and Methuen's future is bright despite the poor economic climate!

Last year, I laid out an aggressive list of priorities and proposed solutions to our financial problems. I would like to begin by briefly outlining the accomplishments that we as a city have made this past year, as well of highlighting some of my future goals.

As you in the business community well know, economic development is a linchpin of our recovery and has long been one of my top priorities. The past year has seen some exciting progress in the way of new business.

For years residents have told me that having an Olive Garden restaurant in Methuen was high on their wish list. With last November's Olive Garden opening at the Loop, that wish became a reality. As expected, the new restaurant is thriving and has brought new life to the Loop area.

Methuen Village at Riverwalk Park, a 91 unit assisted living facility in downtown Methuen, opened last March and is now a staple of downtown.

On Pelham Street, the new Irving Gas Station, Subway and Circle K convenience store opened last spring, and we have seen this area converted into an active commercial corridor, with a new Bank of New England, and a new contract postal facility added to the area. We have made a major infrastructure improvement by improving access to Rte 93 in this area as well that has helped to facilitate this economic development.

Moving to the Jackson & Swan Street area, a new CVS recently open and a Riverbank branch is planned for that gateway intersection. Planet Fitness also opened in this area and Korbani's Bakery greatly expanded.

The new clubhouse and restaurant at the Merrimack Golf Course opened last spring. This included a pro shop as well as much needed function facility. The Reserve, a new neighborhood of 43 luxury homes on the golf course, is also nearly complete.

Construction recently started on the new Lowe's on Route 28 in nearby Salem. For Methuen, this means road widening and traffic improvements on Route 28 in Methuen, as well as what has been called a reverse TIF, allowing Methuen to tax a vacant parcel of parking space on this site as if a commercial development existed on it. This twenty-year deal means that in addition to the road improvements, Methuen taxpayers will benefit from greatly increased tax dollars from this site.

On Wheeler Street, construction just began at the former Zambino gravel pit. Toll Brothers plans to construct 240 units of age-qualified over 55 housing and related infrastructure improvements along Wheeler Street, which will bring a new stream of improved property tax revenue as well as a mitigation payment of one million dollars.

Methuen has been in need of a new modern postal facility for many years. Thanks to the efforts of Senator Kerry and Congresswoman Tsongas, a Request for Solicitations has been issued for a new downtown location. I understand that there are many interested developers, and I am hopeful that this important step will lead to a modern and customer-friendly retail postal facility.

We have also seen many small businesses open in our city last year. The Irish Cottage, Comfort Home Care, Mag Mortgage, Butlers & Bars and Teacher's Pet are just a few examples of thriving small business that now call Methuen their home.

I would like to personally thank all of these companies for investing in Methuen at time when other cities are still seeing businesses close. As mayor, I will continue to do whatever is in my power to help these businesses thrive in our community, to create a larger tax base and give our people jobs.

In the areas of business and development 2010 promises to be an exciting year as well.

The Appleyard site will finally be redeveloped in 2010. The remediation and construction work will commence this coming spring. Once completed, we will have additional parking for our downtown, as well as a beautiful passive recreational park adjacent to a residential neighborhood. This is a key component in the revitalization of our downtown.

Close by, the building at 2 Charles Street will be restored to its original architectural beauty, thanks to the hard work of new owner Benny Espailat. I am happy to be able to announce that a federal grant has been granted in the amount of \$190,000 to improve this building and create a public-private partnership that will allow us to move our entire

historic collection to this site. It is exciting news for our City, and for our collection, which really needs a secure home.

The Loop is continues to thrive and will soon be home to Game Stop, Pearle Vision, Aspen Dental and others.

The I-93 Rotary improvement project is also underway. Short-term improvements will go out for bid in March and the project is still on time and budget thanks to Sen. Baddour, Rep. Campbell and the MassDOT.

Much needed new jobs will be coming to Methuen as well. Suntron, a contract manufacturer currently based in Lawrence, MA and Manchester, NH, will relocate to Methuen in the spring and bring 100 skilled jobs to Griffin Brook Park.

In the heart of East Methuen, the former Rendezvous site is abuzz with construction activity, with both Dunkin' Donuts and Salem Co-operative Bank underway.

Through the actions of the Greater Lawrence Community Action Council, HeadStart will construct a new childcare facility on Gill Avenue - a long-awaited opportunity to provide quality care for Methuen families here in the City.

In the Arlington District, affordable transportation continues to be an issue for some. I'm happy to report tonight that The Merrimack Valley Regional Transit Authority is working with our community development staff and MAN, Inc. to adjust one of its Methuen routes to allow Arlington neighborhood residents direct access to The Loop shopping area.

I look forward to the completion of all of these projects and welcome new opportunities for business expansion and community development.

Along with development, education has been another important focus of my administration. To that end, I have made the modernization of Methuen High School a fundamental goal.

Tonight, I can say that we are well on our way to achieving our goal of having a modern high school facility in the near future. I get a lot of questions on our progress, so let me give you a quick overview. (Review Project progress off the cuff)

If we continue to work hard and stay focused, this important project could be completed in three years. I have, in past remarks, cited President Kennedy, who said "*Our progress as a nation can be no swifter than our progress in education.*" Those words ring especially true today.

As a community we must think about the consequences of a failure to complete this project. Our High School accreditation is at risk, and we would be placing an entire generation of Methuen High School students into an outdated academic infrastructure.

Community sacrifice will be involved, but there is not a more important piece of business to be done in the next two years.

According to economic forecasts, 2010 will be only marginally better than 2009 was. Last year we were able to avoid layoffs and service cuts largely due to our city employees taking deep cuts in pay.

I would like to express my appreciation to all of the employee unions who have worked in a proactive way to help with our budget problems and save jobs. I value the work of the 300 plus dedicated police officers, firefighters, DPW workers and others who keep city government running 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and I will continue to do everything I can to keep them on the job and serving the public.

It is critical for all stakeholders in our system to realize that the current system of municipal finance remains broken and must be reformed. I believe that it is a fundamental deception to pretend that double digit increases in health care and pension obligations are sustainable, even absent the major recession we are in now.

We must reform the way business is done, both locally and at the state level. To that end I respectfully ask that the Legislature consider and pass health care plan design authority for municipalities, as well as adopting the pension reform package put forward by Governor Deval Patrick. Without fundamental reform all municipalities in the Commonwealth will be faced with the unenviable task of cutting services and personnel on a continuing basis until some semblance of fiscal sanity sets in.

Although economic development, adequate public facilities and financial stability are important topics, I know that many Methuen citizens are equally concerned about so-called "quality of life issues." To that end, I find it important to balance the city's policy agenda with matters that are vital to the quality of life of our citizens.

My administration continues to look for ways to make Methuen a greener and more energy efficient city. Over the past years, Methuen's first solar powered lighting system was installed at Martin Park. Methuen also held its first electronics-recycling day, which saved Methuen residents thousands of dollars by allowing them to dispose of environmentally hazardous electronic devices free of charge.

The city recently filed a grant application to conduct a wind survey with the Renewable Energy Trust. And in an attempt to further improve our energy efficiency Methuen has joined Amesbury and Haverhill in utilizing the services of an energy expert who assists all three cities in benchmarking our energy utilization and then working with us to eliminate unnecessary and wasteful usage.

I'm pleased to announce tonight that Methuen will soon be receiving a \$179,000 Energy Efficiency Block Grant from the Obama Administration as part of the Recovery Act. This grant will enable the City to continue making progress on two important municipal goals: the reduction of energy use and expense in city buildings and schools, and the

enhancement of recycling efforts while moving towards a single stream-recycling program.

The City has begun to analyze and address energy efficiency in city buildings and schools. This activity helps the City meet its 10% reduction goal as committed to through the EPA's Community Energy Challenge. Using the new grant the City will leverage National Grid and Bay State Gas incentive dollars for energy efficiency programs that reduce both gas and electricity use.

We are also very close to issuing an RFP for a major solar energy project within the city. Through the use of performance contracting, solar panels will be constructed at no expense to the city. The project will be paid for by the winning bidder, who will be funded by the long-term savings the city will produce.

During the summer, Forest Lake is a refuge from the heat for many Methuen residents. Unfortunately, due to high bacteria levels, the lake had been closed to swimming for significant parts of recent summers. I put a team together to conduct further testing, improve land management, increase filtration and enhance animal control. As a result, there were no closings at all last summer. I will continue these efforts this year and I look forward to working with the Forest Lake Association on obtaining new grants that will further enhance the lake and its surroundings.

At Henry P. Schruender Memorial Park on the Merrimack River, the non-profit Trauma Intervention Program (TIP) continues to create and take stewardship of the "Healing Garden." Last year, the park was cleaned and landscaped. A new stone bench was installed by the riverbank and an informational kiosk was constructed at the trailhead. This spring we look forward to further improvements. My thanks to Jayann Landry of T.I.P. and her team who have worked hard to make this possible. It is the first Healing Garden in the area.

The City's Artist of the Month program continues to thrive. I look forward to meeting Methuen's talented artists every month as they hang their work in my office.

As we work to attain a permanent home for our historic collection, an effort is underway to preserve and restore Methuen's 1893 Robert Frost Attendance Register. The city has applied for a restoration grant and private donations have been coming in from as far away as Boston. Our efforts were featured in the New York Times last month, and last October the poet's granddaughter viewed the Register for the first time during her visit to the Merrimack Valley.

I was very pleased to be able to balance last year's budget without any cuts to the Nevins Library. The library continues to be the cultural hub of Methuen. I look forward to working with the library on future activities as I have done in the past with such successful programs as Methuen Reads, the yearly AIGMV art show, the Grey Court Poets and the *Cape Wind* author's visit.

The coming days hold much in the way of progress and possibility. I look forward to working with citizens and business people alike on many of the critical initiatives that I have outlined here tonight. Given the condition our economy, this year will again bring many challenges. Tough decisions will need to be made. But as long as we remain focused and positive, the state of our city will remain strong. I ask for your continued support this year. With it, I am confident that Methuen will continue to thrive and prosper.

Thank you.