

STATE OF THE CITY  
2006

"It was the best of times. It was the worst of times." Charles Dickens' famous lines seem very much applicable to North Little Rock last year. Many positive projects, programs, accomplishments and developments occurred throughout the year. Unfortunately, the progress we experienced may have been overshadowed by a new electric contract that significantly raised our cost and subsequently our rates. Across the nation and here at home, an unfortunate combination of current events and past practices impacted electricity generation, as well as, transmission capability and capacity. After nearly two decades of declining and low electricity costs, our cost to purchase electricity nearly doubled. Although today's costs are only slightly more than one third higher than costs were twenty years earlier, it was a sudden and dramatic end to an era of low cost electricity.

Looking to the future, however, there is good news that portends well for our City. The Electric Department negotiated and ultimately acquired a 60 megawatt interest in the Plum Point coal fired generating plant near Osceola, AR. When it comes on line in three years, Plum Point will provide nearly a quarter of our anticipated electric usage at a fixed rate that is only slightly higher than the cost per kilowatt hour of the contract that just expired. Additionally, we are in negotiations to purchase a 60 megawatt interest in another coal fired generating plant in

Louisiana. There are, however, some transmission obstacles that must be overcome for this source to be viable. We are working diligently to remove those obstacles.

More good news will favorably impact North Little Rock's energy future. In 2014, the bonds used to finance the Murray Lock and Dam Hydroelectric plant will be retired, freeing more than 13 million dollars in current annual payments. When that happens, inexpensive hydroelectric production will have a tremendously positive impact in upon overall electric costs. Our energy future is promising, but the road from here to there will not be easy.

Another innovative action taken in 2006 will help the Electric Department keep costs down. A contract to purchase 4 megawatts of power generated by Two Pines Landfill methane gas was signed with Waste Management, Inc. This necessitated the construction of a 4.5 mile long transmission line connecting the landfill with our system.

In addition to finding alternative production sources, the Electric Department instituted an aggressive conservation public information program for our customers. Also, in our ongoing effort to minimize weather related outages, trees along more than 50 miles of electric lines were trimmed and 200 decayed poles were replaced. Underground lines were installed at the Cypress Crossing and Faulkner Crossing subdivisions, the Inland Maritime Museum, the Burns Park Soccer Complex, as well as, the

Dickey-Stephens Park baseball stadium. Finally, in another cost savings move, more than 2,000 residential radio read meters were installed allowing us to restructure and reduce meter reading routes from 160 to 70.

The aforementioned Dickey-Stephens Park was the City's most high profile 2006 project. After the positive sales tax vote on August 9, 2005, a public-private committee was created to oversee the design of this most significant structure. The committee's final product is a beautiful blend of modern features in a stadium with a brick and steel old time look and a feel that pays homage to our City's history as an important railroad community.

The year began with the City Council formally accepting the donation of the 11.6 acres by Warren Stephens of Stephens Inc. and his Willow Street Ventures Company. As construction progressed throughout the year, interest and excitement about what will become a North Little Rock downtown landmark increased, as evidenced by the strong season ticket sales and the leasing of all 26 private suites. With 5,100 fixed seats situated close to the field, suites, several areas that can be used for private parties, a full service year around restaurant and a concourse that surrounds the ballfield, fans will be able to enjoy the games from many different perspectives.

The fun surrounding the stadium and the games will literally surround the stadium. Existing, in addition to new restaurants and entertainment

establishments in both downtowns will pitch food and fun before and after Traveler games and other Dickey-Stephens Park hosted events. Several actual projects and potential downtown development can be directly tied to Dickey-Stephens Park. The April 12, 2007 opening will be a major event in our City's history. I look forward to it with great anticipation and pride.

The other major beneficiary of the August 9, 2005 one cent two year sales tax vote is the Hays Senior Center. Since its inception in 2003, the Senior Center has been a resounding success. The Center offers daily activities including fitness, education, nutrition and social programs for all members. The 5 million dollars of the temporary penny sales tax allocated to the Center will add another 22,000 square feet to what is already one of the largest and best senior centers in the mid-south.

A citizen task force established by the City Council went to work in September of 2005. In early 2006, the Building Task Force finished its preparation of the plans and the budget for renovation and expansion. The expanded facility will provide more than 60,000 square feet for: classroom and meeting space; craft and work rooms; additional exercise equipment area; an expanded coffee shop; a state of the art computer lab; and, a second indoor pool. A second pool will allow all of our pool activities such as, aerobics, freestyle and lap swimming to take place at the same time.

The expanded facility will accommodate more exercise equipment and the explosive growth in existing, as well as, new programs. For example, one of our aerobics classes that began in 2003 with 8 ladies has grown to about 70 members on any given day. In fact, all activities from art, working and music classes to dance, billiards tournaments and jigsaw puzzle contests have grown in popularity. Construction commenced in August of 2006 and should be finished in September of this year.

Planning for and beginning the expansion were only part of the Center's good news in 2006. An additional 1,700 members joined last year bringing our total membership to 11,500. More than 150,000 visits were made to the Center throughout the year. With a small staff and approximately 500 members visiting daily, the Center is highly dependent on the volunteers who provided over 12,000 hours of service.

A couple of other innovations helped facilitate the Center's skyrocketing membership growth. We purchased an 8 passenger golf cart that transports members from their cars to the facility Monday through Thursday from 8 a.m. to noon. The cart is used by an average of 100 members a day. Another innovation helped alleviate parking congestion. Carpooling was promoted and carpoolers rewarded with free tickets for meals and events. In effect, this particular effort reduces parking congestion and fuel consumption while it increases event attendance

and social interaction. All of which are positive outcomes for our senior citizens and our community.

Senior Center renovations were not the only significant building improvements that took place during the past year. Completion of the beautiful renovation of the Council Chambers in City Hall happened in early 2006. This was the last component of the long, historically sensitive transformation of City Hall. We can all be extraordinarily proud of our “new” City Hall.

Just outside City Hall across Main Street, demolition of one building to make way for downtowns first new, multi-story, mixed use development commenced. I am certain that this is just the first of several more mixed use residential, commercial and retail developments that will find a place in our central city. Also, outside the doors of City Hall are the tracks of the intercity River Rail Trolley, which enjoyed an eventful and successful year. Construction of the Phase II extension from the existing Little Rock line to the Clinton Presidential Library was started and will be finished in early 2007. Phase III will be a North Little Rock extension and expansion.

More than 121,000 passengers rode the trolleys last year. That figure translates into 340 for every day of operation. The extension to the Clinton Presidential Library and the opening of the Dickey-Stephens Park for Arkansas Travelers baseball games should contribute to ridership growth. Based on discussions that I, several department directors, as well as,

Chamber of Commerce and economic development officials have had with actual and potential downtown developers, the River Rail is a very significant and positive quality of life attribute. I know convention promoters and attendees and other visitors to our City concur.

Another important quality of life contributor to our emerging urban lifestyle had a historical achievement last fall, the completion and grand opening of the pedestrian and bicycle bridge that soars spectacularly over the Arkansas River above the Murray Lock and Dam. At 4,226 feet long, this nearly 13 million dollar bridge is the world's longest bridge built specifically for walking and biking use. On the beautiful evening of September 28, hundreds of people gathered to view and walk the 14 foot wide Big Dam Bridge that links 17 miles of riverside walking and biking trails in North Little Rock and Little Rock. The trail system is another important component to our area's ever increasing quality of life advantages. I truly believe that the bridge itself, with its dramatic height, length, design and aesthetic lights will become an iconic attraction for central Arkansas.

The public's safety continued to have the highest of priorities in North Little Rock. Our recent history of public safety innovation continued last year. The Fire Department joined with the Little Rock Fire Department to build a high rise fire training facility that will play a critical role as buildings in both cities increasingly go vertical. Our ability to respond was further enhanced by the acquisition of a new aerial fire truck and the

replacement of all the Departments self contained breathing apparatus. Our unique portable smokehouse taught fire response techniques to more than 3,000 school kids.

National and state recognition was accorded to the Police Department for several innovative accomplishments. At the International Association of Chiefs of Police in Boston, the North Little Rock Police Department was recognized twice. First, as one of three Departments recognized with the IACP Choicepoint Award for Excellence in Criminal Investigations. Second, as runner-up award winner for "tactics and techniques" that were used to combat methamphetamine productions. Third, the North Little Rock Police Department was selected as a finalist for the IACP Community Policing Award because of the positive changes it administered through the adoption and implementation of community policing practices. The earlier implemented "Meth Aware" program was followed in 2006, by the Departments LeadsOnLabs project. Both of these very creative and successful efforts were considered ample evidence by the judges of our City's commitment to effective, innovative methods of involving the community directly in our policing activities.

The LeadsOnLabs project established an electronic computer facilitated record keeping and sharing system. It records and communicates the identities of individuals acquiring legal pharmaceutical ingredients purchased at several different locations that, when added

together, amount to illegal purchases. The LeadsOnLabs pilot program is the first in the state to collect this information from pharmacies and to then advise them when customers are approaching illegal acquisition amounts. The LeadsOnLabs project which recently won the State Enrique Camarena Award (named for a Drug Enforcement Agency agent killed in the line of duty) is presently competing for the national award. Undoubtedly, it will serve as a model program that will be adopted by police and sheriff's departments across this State and the nation.

Our two other public safety agencies had productive years. In yet another innovative accomplishment, our Emergency Services Department, in cooperation with Little Rock's Office of Emergency Services, submitted their Pre Hazard Mitigation Plan to the Federal Emergency Management Agency for review. In August, the cooperative plan received FEMA approval. This important plan strives to reduce the loss of life and property in both cities due to natural disasters. This proactive plan identifies natural hazards and assesses their risks and examines feasible and appropriate mitigation actions.

To help facilitate communications and coordination during emergencies, the Department of Homeland Security awarded a 260,000 thousand dollar grant to the City for the purchase of additional radio equipment. This new equipment allows us to simultaneously communicate with federal, state and other local agencies.

In 2006, an active Code Enforcement Department focused on cleaning up and clearing out abandoned and inoperable vehicles. The number of vehicles tagged by code officers advising the owners to make them operable was 1,626. All but 75 vehicles were either moved, made operable or shown to be operable. Those 75 were towed off by the Code Department due to the inability to either identify or find the owners. Also, we surveyed new and used car dealers, repair and detail shops to assess business license status, zoning, nuisance and other possible code violations. Since the investigations inception, 6 businesses have ceased operations and 62 citations were issued. We were pleased that 55 of 60 new and used car dealers were properly licensed. Officers conducted 506 rental property and 926 non-rental housing inspections with 103 houses targeted for condemnation consideration. Only 8 structures had to be demolished by the City after owners were advised to either rehabilitate or remove the structure. Finally, Arkansas' only municipal health code officer conducted 224 food business inspections ensuring that proper food handling and serving procedures are being followed in a sanitary establishment.

Burns Park, one of our community's greatest quality of life assets, continued to see improvements and make progress throughout the year. In June, the Burns Park Master Plan was presented to and adopted by the Parks Commission. This plan will guide improvements and investments for

years to come. Its emphasis on strengthening connections between Burns Park and downtown both promotes and complements downtown development by providing people living and visiting here with recreational opportunities rarely found in an urban setting.

The Burns Park Soccer Complex hosted the Region III U.S. Soccer Tournament which brought 184 teams from 9 States to central Arkansas. More than 3 thousand coaches and players attended the tournament. Of course, that number increases dramatically when friends and families are included. The economic impact of soccer, as well as, tennis, softball and baseball tournaments is tremendous and will only increase as these world class facilities become more well known thereby hosting more such events.

The Parks Department installed lights to 4 soccerfields and completely rebuilt the tee boxes and greens on the Championship Course. At the North Heights Recreation Center in the Levy neighborhood, a new gymnasium was constructed and the existing swimming pool was renovated. Improvements to the Community Center, across the street from the Senior Center, began late last year. Protecting and improving the very significant quality of life assets that are the North Little Rock parks is and must continually be among the highest of our priorities.

Citizen participation in their local government continued to increase throughout the year. Citizen involvement in governmental

operations through the State's only local government executive office of volunteerism enjoyed another record setting year. Volunteers are found in many departments; however, they are the lifeblood of two highly visible and used facilities. Both the Senior Citizens Center and the U.S.S. Razorback submarine would be virtually non-functional without our dedicated citizen servants. Based on hours reported by city government departments, commissions, and boards, as well as some non-profit organizations, the Mayor's Office of Volunteer Services, using State of Arkansas cost factors, calculated that the value of 2006 volunteer service exceeded 5 million dollars. That was the first time that threshold was surpassed. Our dependence on these vitally important people is only exceeded by our appreciation of them.

From east to west, significant developments highlighted the year. Three new and one existing subdivision began construction on both sides of the Old England Highway in eastern North Little Rock. The existing subdivision, Stone Links, experience a renewal as Phase II lot sales and housing construction soared. Approximately 1 thousand lots are being developed at both Faulkner Crossing and Cypress Crossing. Lot and house sizes, as well as, costs will run the gamut from entry level affordable housing to riverfront estates, with marinas and boat lunches.

North Little Rock East was home to one of our most significant economic developments. Last spring, Alliance Parts Warehouse

announced that the company would make North Little Rock home to its 105 thousand square foot national auto parts distribution center. Assistance from both the Arkansas Department of Economic Development and the North Little Rock Economic Development Corporation were critically important in the company's decision not to relocate out of the State.

The central city hosted significant developments such as the retention and expansion of the high tech Inviting Company in Prothro Junction. Again, the Arkansas Department of Economic Development and the North Little Rock Economic Development Corporation's assistance allowed the company to remain and expand in our City. In our downtown, the 260 unit Enclave Apartments on the Arkansas River began construction. This five story complex will add residents who will in turn become customers to attractions, events, stores and restaurants in both downtowns.

The same area experienced a veritable explosion in arts related establishments. More than seven arts and crafts related stores including the Arts Scene, an innovative learning, working and selling complex can now be found in a three block downtown area.

The bottom floor of our historic first fire station on Main Street was transformed into a branch of the Laman Library. The North Little Rock History Commission, housed in the second floor of this building, continued

to provide research, technical and financial assistance for historic structure property owners. The Commission also conducted research and hearings related to a significant expansion of the downtown historic district.

Plans and efforts that will ultimately blend new development with historic preservation were undertaken at an astonishing pace from the beginning to the end of the year. Redevelopment districts were formed near downtown to spur two projects that will have positive, long term impacts on our community. With its legal challenges behind them, construction of the proposed 130 million dollar Shoppes at North Hills should proceed in 2007. This lifestyle shopping center situated just south of I-40 and east of I-30 on North Hills Boulevard will house Arkansas' first Bass Pro Shop, as well as, numerous restaurants and stores. A 70 acre nature park will be built at the wetlands due east of the shopping center.

Another redevelopment district was established west of Pike Avenue along River Road. The Lower Baring Cross Redevelopment District will feature the North Bluffs subdivision. This residential development features the new urbanism philosophy with its emphasis on pedestrian traffic, traditional housing design, population density and income diversity. The City Council adopted a Traditional Neighborhood Zoning District to facilitate and promote this and hopefully, similar future developments. Additionally, the River Road Overlay District was adopted for this project.

Further west, much new development occurred throughout the year. At the states fastest growing institution of higher learning, Pulaski Technical College, the 15 thousand square foot Oppenheimer Library and the 12 thousand square foot Campus Center were opened. The Campus Center includes a cyber lounge, a 210 seat lecture hall and student activities areas.

At the Northshore Business Park, the Arkansas Department of Environmental Quality is building its 100 thousand square foot, multi-story headquarters. Situated along the Arkansas River featuring access to our urban trail system, this structure will be our City's first "green building." One of its neighbors at the business park, the Arkansas Surgical Hospital underwent a significant expansion.

Three important developments took place further west. Construction of our City's second Walmart Supercenter began at its new location, the intersection of Maumelle Boulevard and Counts Massie Road. Just up Counts Massie Road, the Brent and Sam's Cookies only production facility underwent an expansion. Finally, the City Planning Commission approved plans for a 684 unit apartment complex that will feature a 9 hole golf course.

Across the City in 2006, the Community Planning permitted more than 68 million dollars worth in commercial, 10 million dollars in single family residential and 19 million dollars in multi-family construction. These

impressive numbers continue the investment growth trend that North Little Rock began experiencing several years ago.

Although there was a pothole in North Little Rock's recent path of progress, it will not cause a detour from the positive direction in which we have been moving. I remain highly optimistic about this City's contribution to the quality and style of life that will make North Little Rock and, indeed, central Arkansas a highly desirable and attractive to visit, live, work and play.