

2010 State of the City

Prepared by Mayor Melissa DeMarco

At this memorable and significant time in the history of the City of Mount Dora, it is my great honor and privilege to serve as your mayor. I hope all of our residents, civic organizations and business owners will join in the celebrations planned throughout the year to commemorate this 100 year anniversary of the incorporation of the City of Mount Dora. Together you make Mount Dora the vibrant, special place that we love. We are a financially sound and well-run city that continues to strive for excellence - for better standards of service, more parks, superior infrastructure, stronger public-private relationships, thoughtful and thorough public safety and a more diverse economy.



Mount Dora was originally incorporated as a town in March 1910. Throughout this year, in conjunction with the many festivals and events that the City normally hosts, we will be celebrating and honoring this historic milestone for the City of Mount Dora.

The New Year's Eve kickoff celebration this year in downtown was the beginning of many events that are planned. We had a ball drop with the traditional countdown to the New Year and a concert in Donnelly Park. The event was sponsored by the City of Mount Dora and the 2010 Committee that is managing the Centennial recognition on behalf of the City. The celebration was a great success and we hope to create a tradition of gathering together to welcome the coming year in our downtown.

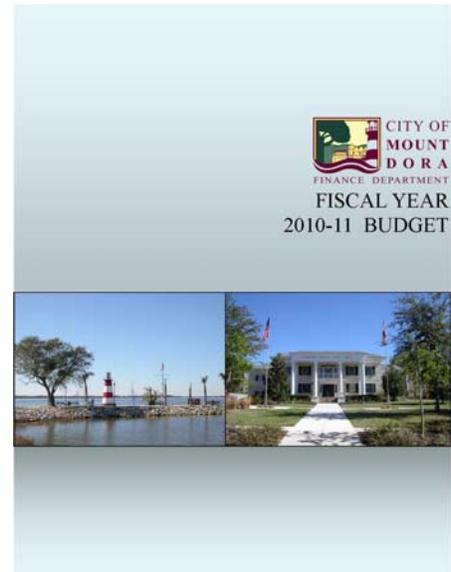


There will be a time capsule buried with items from our residents and businesses enclosed. We will have a special Downtown Art Stroll this year, a "Brain Bowl" for students, a birthday celebration and ice cream social for the residents and many other commemorative activities for our residents to enjoy throughout the year.

I hope that each of these events resonates with all of you in some way. You are the City of Mount Dora. Please note the events and activities posted on the City of Mount Dora's or the Chamber of Commerce's websites and make time on your schedule to join your fellow citizens, friends and family to celebrate our time in history together in this beautiful city that we all love. Let us gather together to honor the efforts of our forefathers who helped us achieve this wonderful result – a City that we protect and cherish with a fierce pride of ownership.

At the end of 2009 the City of Mount Dora was proud to announce that we have been granted the recognition of a National Historic Designation for our downtown. This recognition by state and federal agencies underscores the impressive distinction of our unique and significant downtown. Benefits of being listed on the register include the potential for attracting additional tourism to our area, federal and state rehabilitative grants for historic properties, as well as tax incentives for income-producing properties within the downtown, and a higher ranking or level of consideration when the City applies for grants and funding.

2009 saw a marked drop in revenues to the City of Mount Dora. That trend will continue in 2010. The difficult reality, which we in public service must balance, is that at a time when residents need and demand more services from the government we will have fewer resources available from which to provide those services. This means we will continue to look for ways to provide more with less. Our current millage rate is 5.019 and sets Mount Dora squarely in the middle of tax rates within Lake County. At some point in the quest to trim costs we will affect our ability to provide premium services. The Council will be asked again this year to determine if our millage rate provides the City of Mount Dora with the revenue necessary to provide the quality experience we have come to expect. We have traditionally expected the City of Mount Dora to provide better services, a more attractive and well regulated community, with more parks and recreational programs and amenities than is offered in other cities. Mount Dorans have expected our downtown, which is based on a tourism economy, to be outstanding among the communities of Lake County. Once again, this budget cycle, Council will be asked to ascertain if we can continue, under the current financial reality, to offer more service and a more attractive community while receiving less revenue and maintaining lower millage rates than other communities with whom we compete.



As with any budget constraints, we will always look to provide the most crucial services first – safety, sanitation and infrastructure protection. We will trim amenities first – basic provisions last. Because of prudent financial planning, even in this difficult economic environment the City has moved forward with planned infrastructure improvements and community enhancements. Due to conservative policies and planning, along with the added grants and funding we were able to solicit; the City has been able to continue with the improvements to our community building, toward our new water treatment plant and several other projects.

The realities of the current economy are affecting the City. The Council and the City Manager are working with various departments within our municipal government in an effort to minimize the impacts of these realities on the public we serve. The coming year will continue to present challenges to the operations and management of the City. A small comfort should come from knowing that all of us – city, county, state and federal organizations are struggling to overcome similar issues. We are making unprecedented efforts to collaborate and use our combined resources to best effect – a task overdue, but now occurring to the benefit of the taxpayers of the community.

Our Police and Fire Department offer excellent service to the residents, businesses and visitors of Mount Dora. The Planning and Zoning and Building Departments are taking advantage of our slower economy to restructure and better meet objectives of improved customer service. Our Public Works Department continues to improve and expand their delivery of services to residents while undertaking significant capital improvement projects that will ensure the City of Mount Dora offers quality utility delivery and is prepared for future needs. The W.T. Bland Public Library offers a slate of quality activities and materials which rivals those of significantly larger communities. Our Parks and Recreation Department is working with the community in an effort to expand upon its offerings and better engage with all demographics in the community.



This past year our Police Department responded to, on average, 500 calls per week. Though staffing at the Police Department is lean it does remain adequate to provide immediate response to emergency calls and reasonable response times for non-emergency calls. The Police Department is making efforts, through attrition, to eliminate or civilianize additional positions. The Police Department does apply for and receive grants to assist with their operations. This department, like other City departments is making efforts to reorganize and provide

the best services possible while considering new and innovative ways to operate under the ongoing realities of our budget constraints.

Your Mount Dora Fire Department responded to 3,463 calls for service in 2009. The Fire Department's goal was to respond to calls made to that department in less than 5 minutes. They have succeeded admirably in achieving that goal. Currently, their annual average response time is under 4 minutes and 50 seconds per call. We opened a second station in February of 2009. That station is manned and operates 24/7 and has advanced life support offerings from that new station. Our Fire Department has held and hosted several regional cooperative meetings with other area fire departments including Lake County, Tavares and Eustis. Some key issues upon which these discussions have been focused include expansion



of co-operational agreements for enhanced operations and cost savings, jurisdictional boundaries and first response associated with those boundaries, joint incident and scene command and control, joint purchasing to leverage cost efficiency and equipment standardization, evaluation of station locations and joint training initiatives. All of our hydrants are now located through GPS coordinates.

The City of Mount Dora's Public Works and Utilities Department has continued to oversee twice weekly refuse removal, an expanded recycling program (Mount Dora remains the only community in Lake County whose residents enjoy the benefits of having a single stream recycling program) electric service to residents and businesses, potable and (limited) reclaimed water delivery throughout the community and into adjacent areas, and operation and maintenance of two wastewater treatment plants. Budget cuts did prompt staff reductions of two positions in this Department last year. In addition to providing those services that we all see, and sometimes take for granted, in 2009 Public Works completed several major improvement projects within the City of Mount Dora.

Public Works oversaw the Lake John/Lake Gertrude improvements with the financial assistance of over \$900,000 in received grants. This project had been on the City's capital improvements project list since the mid 1990s and is now completed. This project was the largest storm water project in the City's history. The Lighthouse Point Dredging has been completed; a nutrient-reducing baffle



box was installed in Gilbert Park and at Sylvan Drive to reduce the flow of dangerous nutrients from storm water runoff going into our lakes. Storm water drainage at 4th Avenue was enhanced and other lines were rebuilt and replaced in several locations. Public Works is now developing a comprehensive plan to prioritize and then to address any identified stormwater drainage deficiencies within the City.

The City also received a \$700,000 Community Development Block Grant to be used for sidewalk and sewer improvements. This year will see Public Works beginning the planned construction on its new Eastern Water Treatment Plant. They will also be working closely with Saint Johns River Water Management District to develop a realistic, cost effective AWS (Alternate Water Supply) plan for the City of Mount Dora's future water needs. Like other departments within the City, this department is looking for new cost saving measures and recently replaced cell phones with digital radios.



Our Planning and Development Department is also progressing. In response to the concerns expressed to the City Manager and the City Council over the past few years, the City Manager and the Planning and

Development Director (who oversees the building department) have initiated a multi-pronged approach to improve customer interaction and facilitate faster permitting. The City of Mount Dora's Building Department has been working diligently over the past year to streamline its processes to the benefit of residents, contractors, engineers and architects. The department has clearly made strides in improving customer service. The focus of those efforts is to help all involved in the building process save money and time. For example, both fire plan and new construction review are now being accomplished from within the Building Department to provide a one-stop shopping experience and ease the burden to customers. The Building Department has developed a multi-track permitting system for faster permit processing. Cross-training the inspectors and plans examiners has expedited the plans review process. Better guidelines for the building process are being distributed in permit packages so that minimal standards are clearly available at the beginning of the process.

The department is processing fewer total permits now than it was several years ago. They have pared two positions as a response to this slowdown. Together with the Economic Development Advisory Committee, the Planning and Development Department recommended policy definition and change to make Mount Dora more business-friendly and more forward-thinking in its ability to work with both residents and businesses. The City Council agreed on the need to streamline the site plan review process, to meet periodically with the Planning and Zoning and CRA committee to ensure clearer, more consistent policy is developed and implemented. This focus is based on the acknowledgement that a more diverse and business-friendly economy results in a more sustainable community. The City is also developing a utility tax reimbursement program to ensure we are competitive with other cities relative to start-up costs for new businesses.



Our W.T. Bland Library is a beloved and well-used public resource. The City will begin a long awaited expansion project on that facility later this year. We will be adding almost 7,000 square feet and renovating 5,000 square feet of the existing building. We will be adding paved parking and handicapped parking spaces to the lot, as well. Our library hosted over 289,000 patron visits last year and circulated over 310,000 items among those patrons. We have almost 80,000 items in our

library material collection. W.T. Bland also enrolled over 4,300 attendees in its summer reading program in 2008-2009. The programming at our library is diverse and the offerings in the facility range from children's activities, to art exhibitions, to classical music concerts, to seasonal tax preparation for senior citizens and most things in between. We look forward in

the fall to beginning construction to add a large Children's area, a large community room and a special collections/archives room – among other improvements.

Our Parks and Recreation Department has promoted and opened a new recreational facility on Lincoln Avenue. In January the City opened a Disc Golf Course on Lincoln Avenue to expand on its current offerings which include an expanded dog park, improved baseball fields, an expanded swim program, tennis courts and handball courts in one activity center. The Council recently approved plans for the City's new Recreation and Nature Park which is to begin construction in 2010. The newly revived basketball program offered by Parks and



Recreation now has over 40 children enrolled. The offerings continue to grow with programs as diverse as self-defense courses for women and the continuation of the family-friendly movies in Donnelly Park.

We have begun construction on the City of Mount Dora's Community Building. We hope to see that major Community Redevelopment Agency project completed in the 3rd quarter

of this year and in plenty of time to see an event scheduled in the renovated facility before the end of this year.

The City's employees have foregone raises for two years in a row. Our Human Resources Department has focused on presenting no-cost wellness programs to the employees covering such areas as weight loss, hypertension and cancer prevention to assist in limiting increases to the employee health insurance premiums. This year the City Council will consider options to switch the employee pension program from the existing defined benefit program to defined contribution options for potentially considerable long-range savings to the City of Mount Dora. Changes will be implemented to the existing program. We will be negotiating with both our Police and Fire Department personnel for new contracts in 2010.

The City has strived to improve intergovernmental cooperation by working more closely with Lake County government and the cities of Tavares and Eustis to save taxpayer dollars. We now have a substantially lower tax rate than several other Lake County cities while still enjoying high property value relative to the current economic conditions in Central Florida. City Staff offers quality services to our residents and business owners. We are fortunate to have a strong administrative and operational staff at the disposal of our taxpayers. Among them are literally hundreds of years of experience in providing service to municipalities.

I hear people proclaim that they would like cities to run more like businesses. What I think they mean is that they want more efficiency and less wasteful spending. I think that is something upon which we can all agree. Certainly, we cannot and do not want to run our City like a business in all respects. Businesses are designed to garner profits within a competitive niche



market – cities are not businesses. Businesses are not subject to the public voting process nor are businesses compelled, by statute, to reassess their leadership and make their leaders reapply for their roles on a regular basis through the election process. Businesses are not compelled to reveal their strategies and plans and share them in a public forum. We have a greater responsibility to the public than does a business to its customers.

The Council will be reviewing longer term projects and potential improvements that can be implemented over time. We must sit at the council table with foresight and patience and leave ego and personal interests out of the room as we vision for the future of our community. Most of the projects and planning we discuss will not be implemented during our own tenure on council. The actions we take now to look to the future will provide guidance and direction for the future.

Mount Dora City Council plans to initiate a series of facilitated visioning sessions with the public and the community stakeholders in the coming year. The visioning process is designed to encourage and assist the public to address their concerns and garner their opinions, to focus and forward the desires of the public, to ensure that future additions and development of the City are in keeping with our jointly defined identity and to be prepared and positioned to request outside funding for new opportunities. At the end of the process we will have a guiding philosophy, a defined plan, and it will be built with the input of our residents.

Our residents, business owners and visitors are all encouraged to engage in this visioning exercise. Now is the time to proceed with this endeavor. In this economy, with changes occurring in and around our community, we need to not only respond but to become proactive. Without a strategic plan the City remains reactionary to all the pressures exerted upon us.



Factors such as measurable trends of economic change, shifts in population demographics, public perception of government's operations and strategy along with the potential for available funding all influence the frequency with which visioning – as a basis for strategic planning – should occur. The visioning sessions will not and should not lead to an inflexible strategy that will not be altered. It is a process by which the community and the government set a guiding direction using the principles and priorities brought forth through the sessions. The strategic plan that will result from our community visioning must be flexible enough to accommodate unforeseen future changes yet it must clearly set us on a course for the future.

We need to further define and execute our own vision for Mount Dora's place as a part of the Golden Triangle, a neighbor to Orange County and Seminole County and further define our relationship as a part of Lake County. Mount Dora certainly has an identity as a model historic community reflective of "Old Florida" charm in a compact, appropriately scaled small urban environment. We all intend to continue to honor and to build upon that identity.

This is the time to plan, to strategize, to engage each other in meaningful dialogue about what course to set our community on as we begin the next 100 years of our history. What course should we set for Mount Dora that we believe can best serve those that follow us? If we are to move ahead, we must set a course.

We must look to the changes that will come our way with the construction of the Wekiva Parkway and the continued expansion of Seminole and Orange Counties at and near our borders. We need to prepare for the inevitable return of a robust economy and hope that we display the wisdom of the City's past leaders who so carefully planned for progress and yet insisted that the 441 highway go around, instead of through Downtown Mount Dora. What would we like to see the 441 corridor look like 5 or 10 or 20 years from now? Now is the time to consider our options and plans.



What possibilities for redevelopment would we like to consider for the Golden Triangle shopping area? Does the City of Mount Dora need to accelerate its plan for waterfront improvements and should we engage in conversations with private property owners to that end? Do we continue to expand the downtown core? Should we consider adding population density to the areas adjacent to the core to help the downtown area and the Highland Street corridor thrive? Is there a need to be less reliant on tourism by providing those areas with year-round residents within walking distance to the shops, services and businesses located in those areas? For which grants or appropriations do we apply?

With every federal or state grant we receive comes a commitment to a significant expenditure and course of action on the part of the City of Mount Dora. Fortunately, these are not decisions that I - or any individual members of City Council - make unilaterally. I would ask you to participate, to encourage others to participate to engage with your local government. Together, we need to provide the vision for the City of Mount Dora to move into its next century. One of my favorite quotes comes from author and futurist Alvin Toffler, "You've got to think about the big things while you're doing small things, so that the small things go in the right direction."



Those large things that we articulate through a visioning process and then aim to execute through a strategic plan are those things we would like to see for the future of our community. Those large things that the community would like to see happen should be the guiding direction to our local government. The Council and the City Manager will need to work diligently together as a team to make certain that the small things we discuss at our meetings serve our larger purpose going forward. That is the way to make progress, to ensure that Mount Dora is set on the proper course to enjoy a robust and fruitful second century. We are a wonderful

community with a sound fiscal outlook, a well-rounded and generous complement of services amenities and an involved and caring population.



Melissa DeMarco, Mayor