

State of the Town Address 2010

Mayor Scott D. Jackson

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as prepared for delivery

Good evening friends. It is my pleasure to welcome you here tonight for my first State of the Town address before the Hamden Chamber of Commerce.

There are a number of ways in which I can attack the very complicated question, "what is the State of the Town?" A few years ago I worked with a wise older gentleman who said, "there are three versions of the truth: my version, your version, and what's really happening."

I can give you my version of the truth and be done with my presentation: The state of the Town is strong. But you deserve more, and anyone who knows me can attest to the fact that I never answer a seemingly simple question with an unqualified answer.

The state of Hamden depends on who you are, where you live or work, your age, your gender, your sexual orientation, your race, whether or not you were born in this country. In other words, the state of the Town is not dissimilar from the state of the union. Except, unlike President Obama, my address will not run 69 minutes. Close, but not quite.

Over the course of the years, I have been many things. I have been a son and a brother, a husband, a student, a teacher, occasionally an athlete. Even, for the last four months, a Mayor. But, in my humble opinion, my most significant role has been that of father. What is the state of the Town for our children? For my sons, Eli and Max?

CHILDREN

They are one and soon-to-be four. They will attend as walkers Ridge Hill School, the same elementary school I attended from 1979 to 1983. Their mother has earned a PhD. From Yale University and their father is Mayor. They have no video game system at home, but there are books in every room and they are read to every night. Max is in pre-school and Eli will be shortly. We are both employed in full-time jobs. Their mother is a member of Congregation Mishkan Israel, their father is a non-denominational Christian.

For Max and Eli, the state of the town is strong. They use every park in this great Town, from Mill Rock to Brooksvale. Max is learning to ride a bike, and the Farmington Canal Trail, in a few years, will be available to him for both recreation and transportation. The statistical evidence indicates that, based on where they live and who their parents are, they will excel in the classroom. Hamden's dropout rate is 3.9%, far below the statewide average of 7.5%. From honors level courses at Hamden High School, the world will be their oyster, because a top-level education

in the Hamden Public Schools is the best that Connecticut offers; it has been said that the best economic stimulus package is a college degree.

But, by the same token, they have two working parents who work unusual schedules. This increases the chances for childhood obesity, one of the critical health issues affecting children in Hamden, in Connecticut, and across the nation. Over 9 million children between the ages of 6 and 19 are overweight or obese, 300% of the number in 1980.

Max also suffers from asthma. Since he was two years old, he has taken a pill every morning. We have excellent insurance through the Town of Hamden, and that pill costs us fifty cents a day. The unsubsidized rate would be more than four dollars a day, roughly equivalent on an annual basis to what it costs my wife and I to heat our home. When I was a boy in Hamden, I had asthma. It went away when I left Hamden and went to college. Connecticut is dense. Motor vehicles are the largest source of air pollution in Connecticut, and asthma is directly linked to smog and air pollution. Since 1994, asthma rates in Connecticut have increased more than 50%. Asthma keeps kids out of school, off of the playgrounds, and keeps them out of the youth sports programs that are so valuable to their development.

Max hasn't had an asthma attack since he started on his medicine. Medicine that we can afford because we are two working parents with a rich insurance benefit. Despite the HUSKY Plan, the State of Connecticut's insurance offering for children of all income levels, there are more than 50,000 uninsured children in Connecticut and more than 330,000 uninsured residents of all ages. Max gets his medicine every morning because providing that pill at fifty cents a day does not mean that the mortgage, or the electricity bill, or the car insurance, will go unpaid.

Or the preschool bill. Our Superintendent of Schools, Fran Rabinowitz, has worked very hard to inform parents across the region of the critical importance of preschool and the statistical links between preschool and long-term academic success. It may not be the reading and math skills that make the difference, but rather the behavioral self-regulation skills—paying attention, following instructions—learned in a preschool environment that give these children a leg up when they enter kindergarten.

For Max and Eli, two children with almost every conceivable advantage, the state of the Town is strong. For two children in a house at the poverty level, or where a single parent may have to work multiple jobs to keep a roof over their head, the prospects are far less clear. The statistical chances of achieving proficiency on the Connecticut Mastery Tests are actually stacked against a child in Hamden who receives free or reduced lunch.

So these are the challenges. Hamden is not in a position to eradicate child poverty or guarantee health insurance for all. But as a government and a civil society, we do our best to offer a hand to those who need it. Speakers of more than fifty languages are educated in our schools every day. Through a robust array of parks and organized youth activities, we encourage an active, healthy outdoor lifestyle. Hamden's Partnership for Young Children, a volunteer group of parents, educators,

and other community stakeholders, has established a website—hamdenkids.org—to help parents identify affordable child care and preschool resources. In order to expand our array of offerings in times of shrinking resources, we must ensure that our schools, our libraries, our parks, and our Youth Services Bureau act in greater concert with parent groups and private artistic or educational organizations to provide seamless programming for the children of Hamden. Fortunately, we have true leaders—people not bound by past practice or turf issues—working on these most critical issues.

SENIORS

Let's switch gears from my sons to my mother. She is a senior citizen, still living in the home that she and my dearly departed father bought before I was born. This is the first year since 1975 that there will be no cost of living increase for Social Security recipients. The reason given is that consumer prices have fallen in the last year. Yet the Consumer Price Index for our region shows a 2.9% increase in calendar year 2009. A 2.9% increase in costs coupled with no increase in primary source of income reduces the buying power of our seniors. Compared to the national average of 12.4%, nearly 18% of Hamden's residents are over age 65. When one out of every six potential local consumers is facing a reduction in buying power, that impacts everyone in this room. Dentists, accountants, and merchants.

By choice, and sometimes by necessity, our seniors are staying in their homes longer. This has led to a tremendous surge in Hamden's health care cluster, which in turn helped partially insulate our local economy from global woes. But we must be prepared to wade into the waters to help those senior residents stay in their homes. Under Mayor Henrici, the Town of Hamden established a policy that would prevent any senior resident from paying more than 8% of their income in residential property taxes; anything in excess of that could be deferred as a lien and paid off when the title to the property changed hands. With this budget, I intend to offer an increase in property tax exemptions to the seniors who need it most.

I mention our children and our seniors because, in many ways, they comprise our most at-risk populations. And understanding the at-risk populations gives us, as a government and as a civil society, the best chance to establish policies and programs to mitigate risk and, in doing so, strengthen the community we call home. At the same time, the issues that impact them, and impact all of us, are reflections of the greater global economy.

ECONOMY

I don't have to tell you about the economic chaos of the last two years. You've lived it. And while we are clearly not out of the woods, there are glimmers of hope on the horizon. Just yesterday, Manpower Inc. reported in its regular quarterly Employment Outlook Survey of more than 18,000 employers that 73% of employers expect to remain stable in their staffing levels and 16% expect to add employees. 12 of 13 industry sectors expect to see neutral or positive growth, as do 94% of Metropolitan Statistical Areas. Locally, the New Haven-Milford MSA showed 75% of employers expecting to maintain their staffing levels and 14%

expect to increase them. In fact, the Northeast Region had the highest results in terms of positive outlook. Clearly, there is cautious, but widespread optimism that we are on the road to recovery.

But there is a mixed bag here in Connecticut. We have the highest power costs in the continental United States and an aging transportation infrastructure that makes the movement of goods challenging. While we offer the most highly skilled and highly educated workforce in the world, we have also seen a net decrease in jobs over the last twenty years. Our workforce has, by necessity, become mobile, going where the jobs are.

CRIME

One indicator of community health, particularly in a place like Hamden where much of our Town, in fact, is an urban area, is crime. The day after my election, I was interviewed by a reporter who asked a multifaceted question along the lines of, “with all of the challenges in Hamden, such as infrastructure needs, increasing crime, and difficult budgets on the horizon, how do you start the process of making it a better place to live?” Well, I answered the infrastructure part and the budget part, but I didn’t address the issue of crime for one reason: I wasn’t sure it was accurate. Police Chief Thomas Wydra and I have had many long and esoteric conversations about the uniformity of crime statistics. But the fact is, crime in Hamden is not increasing. Crime in Hamden is decreasing. Over the last ten years we have seen decreases in thefts, in auto thefts, in burglaries. City-data.com, the preeminent compiler of municipal statistics, shows a decrease in Hamden’s so-called “Crime Index” from 213 in 1999 to 174 in 2008, the last year for which full data is available. Lower than West Hartford. Lower than Manchester. Lower than Milford. Lower than Branford. And far lower than the national average of 320. Hamden is a safe place to live and work.

Yet we can do better. I am announcing this evening that I have been invited to join, and will accept the invitation to join a group called Mayors Against Illegal Guns, a coalition co-chaired by New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Boston Mayor Thomas Menino and dedicated to the belief that we can—and must—do more to stop criminals from getting guns.

Hamden is safe because we have excellent and dedicated public guardians, and we also have great civic leaders who make it known that crime will not be tolerated in their neighborhoods.

VOLUNTEER EFFORTS

Which brings me to Hamden’s greatest asset: the old New England volunteer spirit that has never gone away. We have more than thirty Town-sponsored boards and commissions on which Hamden residents serve as volunteers, and there is real competition for those slots. Our civic groups and our PTAs pay attention and participate in a constructive fashion. Volunteers care for our traffic islands and provide tax assistance. In 2010, when everyone is under pressure, people in this Town still find a way to make time for the community good.

We will need to do more, though. S. E. Finer's 1700-page opus *The History of Government* tells us that government emerged to establish and enforce the rules of civil society. In fits and starts, it assumed some of the roles of other institutions and entities. But, as governmental resources shrink, if Hamden is to retain its quintessence, the community is going to have to take back some of these responsibilities. Already PTAs have taken on the role of fundraiser for school efforts; already the Clean and Green Commission has taken responsibility for cleaning Town Center Park after our very popular summer concerts. Leadership from civic groups in taking control of projects and programs will be the key element to our community's continued prosperity.

CONCLUSION

Given its timing, some have come to think of the State of the Town as a preview to the Mayor's proposed budget. And throughout my remarks, I have offered clues about items and themes I expect to present in my budget next week. I mentioned earlier that 12 of 13 industry sectors in the Manpower Outlook Survey expect to see growth in the next quarter. The one that does not is Government. Over my professional career, I have had the chance to do many things, including hire energetic young people and, on occasion, let people go when they are not living up to expectations. One thing I have never had to do is let people go simply because the money isn't there. Until now. I will propose a smaller Town workforce with my budget, and I am deeply concerned for the families who will be impacted. And I will do everything in my power to help them take advantage of what I sincerely hope will be an expanding economy.

But we cannot sit back and expect the tide of the state or the global economy to lift our boat. We must be hawkish on expenditures and actively grow our grand list through business development programs. We must move forward with what has been called "Entrepreneurial Regionalism", where communities on an ad-hoc basis seek out those places where they can combine services for the greater good of reduced cost and/or service enhancements. On Election Day, a forward-thinking resident asked me to think about a "Restaurant Week", where Hamden spotlights its various dining options and brings in people from out of town to discover that Hamden truly has it all. I will be coming to the Chamber, after the major planning involved with the Business Expo, to discuss the idea.

Critical to both our neighborhoods and our businesses is an improvement in our transportation infrastructure. I have applied for, and have passed the first stage of review, a request for federal funds through the Council of Governments to perform the traffic studies necessary to keep traffic off of our residential roads and onto the commercial corridors. In order to be advantageous to our small businesses, that traffic must travel at appropriate speeds. We also need to enforce civility on the roads, and I join my friend to the south, Mayor John DeStefano of New Haven, in calling for a review of red-light camera implementation. We cannot police every intersection at every minute. Red-light cameras will allow us to penalize violators, maintain the pedestrian-friendly nature of many of our commercial areas, and bring better order to our local traffic patterns.

We must be prepared to adapt to a new reality. I recently learned that when I was growing up in Hamden, 66% of students walked to school. Today that number is 13%. Our way of doing business must reflect these changes. The Board of Education and the Town can no longer abide by the firewall that exists between our two sides of the ledger. I am proud of the work that Superintendent Rabinowitz and I, along with our respective teams, have done to bridge that gap and move forward as one enterprise instead of two entities. We are working harder and working smarter.

Hamden is diverse and inclusive, and this is our strength. Hamden is strong because its people are strong. Hamden is resilient because its people are resilient. Hamden is caring because its people are caring.

We stand at the edge of a new horizon. The state of the Town is strong, but more important, the state of the Town is alert. It is prepared.

Believe in Hamden. I do.

Thank you.