

State of the County
Wayne County Executive Robert A. Ficano
Feb. 27, 2008

HEADED FOR THE FUTURE

Good evening and welcome.

Thank you for joining us.

It is an honor to serve the citizens of Wayne County.

As I stand before you to deliver my sixth state of the county address, I am humbled by the confidence you have shown in me.

I would like to thank our hosts at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History.

This museum, the largest of its kind in the nation, is one of the educational and historical gems of our region.

Tonight we are being broadcast live on WJR-760 AM and taped for Comcast Cable.

Thank you for being our media partners for the sixth consecutive year.

I would like to welcome members of the Wayne County Commission and other elected officials who have joined us.

Please stand.

Thanks for being here.

Now let's take a moment of silence to recognize our veterans and troops at war and the sacrifices of their families.

I'm here tonight with a message of vision and hope, not despair.

A message of change, not status quo.

And action, not rhetoric.

The dictionary defines vision as "anticipating what will come to be."

Wayne County is headed for the future with a vision of an environment where families thrive, businesses grow and our children receive a good education.

A poor economy and the unprecedented downsizing of the auto industry have diminished our citizen's confidence in the future.

We've been overwhelmed with layoffs, buyouts, foreclosures and people leaving the state.

Doing more with less has become a way of life.

But no storm lasts forever.

Whatever problems confront us, better days are ahead if we band together as a region.

Our vision for Wayne County has not changed because of difficult times; in fact, we are stronger in our resolve.

Like never before, we all must work together.

We must learn from the past, live in the present and focus on the future.

The world is rapidly changing.

We must change or fall behind.

Here in Wayne County, it all starts with government doing its job every day.

Wayne County does not have a roller coaster government, up one day, down the next.

I am proud of the excellent service that our departments deliver.

And deliver consistently.

That's a tribute to Wayne County's employees.

I'm pleased we have reached a tentative agreement on a four-year contract with the leaders of AFSCME.

Combined with previous settlements, the county has agreements with unions representing approximately 80 percent of our employees.

Like others in metro Detroit, we have made sacrifices.

The size of Wayne County government has been dramatically reduced since 2002, with hundreds of positions eliminated through attrition and layoffs.

I'd like to commend our unions and our employees for joining with us to do what's necessary to stabilize our government and protect jobs.

Efficiencies are the cornerstone of good government.

Wayne County is the first government in Michigan to adopt Managing for Results, a performance-based program utilized in the private sector.

We are holding ourselves accountable to you.

Wayne County is a two billion dollar business and we're serious about running it like one.

Let me share with you a few examples on how we at Wayne County are working for our taxpayers.

Wayne County has balanced its annual budget without tax increases for five consecutive years, despite reductions in state revenue and numerous other challenges.

Our credit rating with Standard & Poors is strong and Moody's has removed the negative outlook from the County's rating.

Fitch has confirmed our Bond rating with a stable outlook.

These ratings from the three major agencies illustrate confidence in Wayne County's fiscal accountability and management. They also save taxpayers money in lower interest rates.

Our executive team negotiated a landmark deal to acquire the historic Guardian Building with the support of a majority of the county commissioners.

We will save taxpayers millions of dollars in costly rent and maintenance payments at the Wayne County Building.

We continue to negotiate for a purchase of the Wayne County Building but only at a price that makes sense for the taxpayers.

We have turned a liability into an asset.

Instead of paying millions of dollars in rent, the County owns its buildings.

Our Department of Environment negotiated an agreement on new regional sewer improvements that will save Western Wayne communities about \$175 million during the next decade.

These enhancements will also improve water quality in the Rouge River.

Since its formation three years ago, our One-Stop Business Resource Center has assisted more than 2,000 businesses.

Starting this spring, anyone seeking a permit in Wayne County will have their request processed in 60 days.

Guaranteed.

Now, that is truly business friendly!

Our Department of Homeland Security has set up a countywide alert program to notify the public of emergencies and important public safety issues.

Last year, we used Countywide Alert for the opening of the Grosse Ile Bridge and snow emergencies in Dearborn and Trenton.

We continue to sign up people for this free service at Wayne.getalerts.org.

Our nationally recognized Nuisance Abatement Program took legal action to improve more than 800 vacant or blighted properties last year.

We're helping rebuild communities, one neighborhood at a time.

The health of our communities is critical to our quality of life. Our Department of Public Health last year launched Operation Safe Sleep to save babies from tragic, premature death due to unsafe sleeping conditions.

More than 1,600 calls for assistance were answered.

Last Friday, the funeral was held for Dr. Sophie Womack. She was more than a physician and an international medical expert. Wayne County is deeply indebted to Dr. Womack for her service as program chair and spokesperson for Operation Safe Sleep. I am honored that Dr. Womack also served as a member of my executive women's advisory council. We have lost a tireless warrior and in her honor I am pleased to announce a \$1,000 donation from my Wayne County Executive Vision Fund to the Circle of Hope Coalition formed by Dr. Womack and her husband, Dr. James Womack. Sophie, you are already sorely missed.

Another sign of progress on the health front comes from our Patient Care Management Systems. Its HealthChoice dental and medical programs are being expanded to an additional 19,000 Wayne County residents.

Our Community Mental Health Agency has the state's highest number of trained Peer Support Specialists.

These are consumers who have good mental health and now help other consumers.

They use their own stories of recovery to lead by example.

Our Community Outreach division reaches people regardless of age.

In one program, they have taught the benefits of healthy nutrition and exercise to more than 6,000 children.

Of course, Wayne County provides many basic day-to-day services that may not get attention until they are not done or are not there.

They make our lives so much better.

For example, the Department of Public Services maintains more than 2,000 miles of roads...

Parks and Recreation has more than 7,500 acres of public recreation land for its multitude of year-round programs.

Beginning this year, Public Health will send nearly 17,000 birthday cards to women turning 40 to promote breast cancer awareness and proactive testing.

Whatever the service, the Wayne County we envision is a Wayne County for all people.

Those who are struggling must not be left behind.

They must be helped.

That simply is the RIGHT thing to do and it is our responsibility to do all we can to help our neighbors.

Our Children and Family Services Department is recognized nationwide for its innovative programming that assists people in need.

One of their initiatives is a new social and economic development program to help our residents find work.

Tonight I am proud to announce the creation of Wayne County STEP, the Second Chance Through Expungement Program.

Under this program, residents who have had only one, non-violent conviction and have lived a clean life for at least five years will be eligible to set aside that past conviction.

Today, one simple indiscretion can permanently block a person's pursuit of a barber's or real estate license or many other state licenses. We need to reopen those job opportunities for citizens who qualify for a second chance.

Expungements have been legal in Michigan since 1965 but the cost and complexity of the current process have prevented many from starting their lives over.

Wayne County STEP is the first government program in Michigan to take an active role in the process.

The program has been so well received that I would like to recognize our religious and community partners.

I would also like to give special thanks to America's favorite judge, Greg Mathis, who has agreed to work with the county to increase awareness for the STEP program.

Thank you all.

What makes Wayne County so special?

That's easy.

It's our people.

People like the anonymous military family stationed in Virginia who recently offered their home in Redford Township to a homeless mother and her three children.

People like the employer who trained and hired the homeless woman who had been living in a Westland shelter that Wayne County supports.

People like the limo company owner who had the homeless family taken to dinner and a visit to the county's Lightfest in Hines Park.

Thanks to the compassion of Wayne County people, Deborah Rush has a new job and her family has a home to live in until they become financially stable.

Most importantly, they have a future.

People helping people, that's what Wayne County is all about.

Ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to introduce Deborah Rush and her children, Shawn, Chris and Angela.

What does Wayne County government do?

I am proud to say it provides a wide variety of services for a better quality of life.

It gives us the framework here at home to build for the future and the bigger picture.

We have a vision for Wayne County that will make a good county even better.

It all starts with overcoming the paralysis of fear.

History is filled with naysayers and doubters.

Their vocabulary consists of words like can't... won't...and never.

They dwell more on our fears than our hopes and vision.

They prefer to curse the darkness than light a candle.

Blame the past, rather than work for a brighter future.

But that's not the spirit of Wayne County.

We must emulate those in history who were willing to push for change, to take risks and work hard for what they believed in.

Many years ago, politicians in the state capital in Lansing argued over the safety of a proposed bridge for more than two decades.

It would be too long, some said.

It would not withstand bitter winters or high winds, they said.

It would collapse when ships would strike the supports.

There were plenty of reasons not to build that bridge.

Finally, after a passionate political debate, the legislature approved plans to build the bridge.

Critics called it “Soapy’s Folly,” after the governor who supported its construction, G. Mennen “Soapy” Williams.

The Mackinac Bridge -- the bridge critics said couldn’t be built -- has been in operation for more than 50 years.

That’s the vision of hope we need now!

Rosa Parks said: “I have learned over the years that when one’s mind is made up ... this diminishes fear; knowing what must be done does away with fear.”

Don’t tell me we can’t overcome the challenges we face in Wayne County and the region because I know we can.

We need resourcefulness, imagination, fortitude and, maybe most importantly, faith in ourselves.

Today’s opportunities are more important than yesterday’s mistakes.

And our vision in Wayne County is focused squarely on the future and capitalizing on what we can do, not what we can’t do.

And speaking of things that we MUST do... we’ve taken a leadership role in pushing for the expansion of Cobo Hall and creation of a tax-free zone.

There’s still a lot of work to do... but don’t tell me that we CAN’T do it!

The seeds of cooperation we planted are beginning to spread across the state.

Legislation has been introduced that would make Cobo a first-class venue for the North American International Auto Show.

This show is worth nearly \$600 million to this region each year -- the equivalent of five Super Bowls or 40 World Series games.

The expansion of Cobo is NOT about headlines. It’s about real people and real jobs.

More than 16,000 jobs are tied to Cobo.

Luciano Delsignor from Bacco Ristorante in Oakland County says his business benefits tremendously from the auto show at what would normally be a down time of the year.

Mike Davis, president of the Carpenters and Millwrights Union, and Mike Fawaz, president of Local 1234, say the auto show provides 1.4 million man hours of work for its members every year. Workers in Wayne, Oakland, and Macomb counties each receive 25 percent of those hours.

Hani Mio owns and operates seven hotel franchises in Oakland and Macomb Counties. He says the Auto Show has a huge economic impact on his businesses and the people he employs.

Real people, real jobs.

As I said in my State of the County address last year, we will not stand by idly while others try to take parts of our show from us.

We are fighting to preserve our crown jewel and will not sit by waiting to see what happens.

We're going to make something happen for the good of our region and state.

The tax-free zone will give consumers a welcome break from the six-percent sales tax and bring more business to town.

For example, a consumer who buys a \$5,000 computer during an electronics show at Cobo would save \$300 in sales taxes.

Someone purchasing a \$20,000 car during the Auto Show would save \$1,200.

A tax-free zone would help attract small and medium-sized conventions that we aren't attracting now.

Of course, more conventions will also impact nearby businesses like hotels and restaurants.

Our website Coboformichigan.com has received thousands of hits from citizens who want to learn more about this project.

The region and the state must come together to get this done by the end of the year.

There is no time to waste.

Wayne County's approach to job creation is cutting edge.

Last year, Wayne County became the first local government in Michigan to offer a cash incentive directly tied to new jobs created specifically for local residents.

In this new economy, talent is the new currency and we want to keep that talent in Wayne County.

So, with the support of the Wayne County Commission, we started a pilot program that has produced significant results.

I am pleased to announce tonight that German-based IAV Automotive Engineering, accepted our offer of thousands of dollars for new Wayne County jobs.

IAV will be locating its North American Headquarters in Northville Township this year.

IAV will build a \$16.5-million dollar R&D facility that will create approximately 65 new engineering jobs and 180 total jobs within five years.

At least 35 of these new jobs will be created for people living in Wayne County.

Surrounding states already offer cash up front for jobs as part of their incentive packages.

Based on our success with IAV, we will be seeking the support of the Wayne County Commission in the near future to establish a Job Creation Fund for Wayne County residents.

Providing a company in Wayne County with a financial incentive for every new job it creates –may not seal a deal itself.

But it will be another valuable resource for Wayne County to include as it aggressively recruits new business and new jobs.

We've tried this incentive program and it works.

Wayne County residents will receive jobs and Wayne County will reap the benefits of new tax dollars.

Let's expand the fund and create more jobs!

And speaking of economic development and jobs, our new tax incentive program known as TURBO has hit the ground running.

TURBO was created by my administration and it is the first program of its kind in Michigan.

TURBO stands for Transforming Underdeveloped Residential and Business Opportunities and that's exactly what's happening.

TURBO offers a 100-percent tax exemption for the initial years of construction plus other meaningful cash rebates.

After only one year in operation, TURBO has helped spark \$250 million in new investment. More than 2,500 new jobs will be created countywide with TURBO incentives.

Thanks to TURBO, we have:

- new retail projects in Highland Park and Detroit,
- manufacturing facilities in Van Buren Township and Livonia;
- hotels in Romulus;
- and food-service facilities in Canton Township and Taylor.

Thanks to Commissioner Keith Williams, TURBO recently helped rehabilitate a burned out building in Detroit that had been an eyesore for years. A \$1- million, multipurpose facility with medical, dental and pharmaceutical services for the uninsured will be constructed at the site this year. Seventy-five new jobs are expected. (I'd like the owner, Dr. Augustine Kole-James, and Commissioner Williams to stand and be recognized for their work on this project.)

The word is spreading loud and clear – Invest in Wayne County and Wayne County will invest in you!

The time is now!

It was Bill Gates who said: "We always overestimate the change that will occur in the next two years and underestimate the change that will occur in the next ten."

I agree.

What we sow today will reap benefits down the road.

We are widening our notion of the region beyond the borders of Southeast Michigan and changing the way we think about the future.

Wayne County has opened three offices in China to provide trade and cultural assistance and guidance.

By expanding our worldwide presence, we continue to form partnerships that will grow this region and state.

Last year, our China trade mission included the taping of “Building Bridges: From the Great Lakes to the Great Wall.”

This TV special featured the Wayne County delegation.

We applaud Carol Cain and Trey Fabacher for producing such an informative look into our growing relationships with China.

I'd also like to thank John Carroll and the Detroit Regional Chamber for their support and valuable input on all the trade missions.

Another future initiative is our Aerotropolis effort that will build our regional foundation and diversify our economy.

There are nearly 19,000 jobs at Metro Airport.

Nearly 12,000 of those employees live in Wayne County -- more than 2,000 are from the City of Detroit.

We need to protect those jobs and add many more.

Next month we will begin seeking bids to construct a mile and a half sewer extension for the Pinnacle Aeropark near Metro Airport.

This will be the first major infrastructure improvement at Pinnacle and it paves the way for businesses to locate there as part of the Aerotropolis.

Ten entities, including seven local communities, also have signed a memorandum of understanding to work together to develop an Airport City in Southeastern Michigan.

Detroit Renaissance has made the Aerotropolis one of its top priorities as part of its Road to Renaissance plan.

I have appointed a Task Force of public and private representatives to support the Road to Renaissance.

We are making progress.

They are developing a master plan and a marketing strategy to attract businesses to one of the most logistically appealing areas in the nation.

The development process takes time but we are committed to doing things the right way – as a team.

I'm happy to announce tonight that Alternegy, a Delaware company, is developing a biodiesel fuels production plant at Wick and Middlebelt Roads in Romulus.

Wayne County is committed to promoting renewable transportation fuels.

Alternegy's 25,000-square-foot facility will produce 10 million gallons of carbon-reducing biodiesel fuel per year.

It also has the capability of expanding to 30 million gallons per year.

Biodiesel is the fastest growing renewable fuel in the United States.

It is environmentally friendly and the demand is increasing.

Wayne County is one of the leading governmental users of biodiesel, having purchased nearly a million gallons since 2006.

This facility in Romulus will be the second biodiesel plant to locate in Wayne County.

This is only a start.

In my State of the County address in 2006 I proposed a zero tax on alternative fuel.

We commend the governor for joining those who support this tax relief.

It has been said that failure is the path of least resistance.

Failure is not, and will never be, an option in Wayne County.

You've heard about a lot of "firsts" here tonight.

That's because Wayne County is out front with many of its innovative programs and services.

The future is bright if we keep working with a passion for progress.

We have a broad vision.

The Wayne County we all want is within our grasp.

We have more than hope... we truly BELIEVE that change is possible.

It's really just up to all of us.

Let's build on what makes this county so special.

When we look around Wayne County today, what do we see?

We see 43 communities with a diverse population that resembles the rest of the world.

We see a resilient workforce willing to do what it takes to support their families.

We see two million people, a greater population than many U.S. states.

We see two world-class airports with tremendous growth potential.

We see a hospitable community capable of wowing the world with a Super Bowl, a World Series, an International Auto Show, and the upcoming Final Four.

We see unsung heroes whose acts of kindness remind us that charity begins at home.

We see beautiful parks, historic landmarks and a river between two great countries.

We see sports champions who entertain and make us proud.

And yes, we see a place where our children and grandchildren will work, attend schools, raise their families and spend leisure time in peace and prosperity.

I am proud to be your county executive of the great County of Wayne.

With your help, we will continue to accomplish great things.

Let's stay focused on our vision.

Let's build our dreams together.

May God bless you and Wayne County...

Good night!