

2003 State of the City Address

City of Newton

April 8, 2003

Mayor Marge Roberson

Thank you for the opportunity to address you tonight. As I review my year as Mayor of the City of Newton, I am reminded of the many exciting things that have been achieved this year, and I'd like to share some of those with you, along with some of the opportunities and challenges we face in the coming year.

One of the biggest accomplishments was the retention of Harvey County in the Wichita Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA). This will serve Harvey County and Newton by saving over \$1.3 million a year for our health care community, and the City of Newton played a leading role in this achievement. Keeping the county in the Wichita MSA was a major victory.

Another great accomplishment was the rehabilitation of the main airport runway at the Newton City/County Airport. Federal funds were allocated and construction was completed to fully rehabilitate the main 7,000-foot runway. This project, the biggest of all the capital maintenance tasks at the airport, was accomplished at a reasonable price by utilizing federal funds to pay for 90% of the project.

The Blue Sky Sculpture has been a wonderful addition to the community's public art stock. Looking back in time, we've noted that public art is installed in Newton on an average of once every 40 years, so I think we should feel

especially lucky to have been a part of this great project. Already, the Blue Sky Sculpture has been recognized on regional television, and has been featured statewide in newspapers as an imaginative and attractive piece of public art work. The Newton Community is fortunate in having a public minded citizen like Lloyd Smith, who donated the Blue Sky Sculpture to the citizens of Newton.

The Newton Neighborhood Revitalization Program continues to be a highly used and successful program for the community. The NRP has helped 70 property owners in Newton to upgrade their homes and businesses in the past five years. The plan is designed to give property owners in the Neighborhood Revitalization Area the opportunity to receive up to a 10 year tax rebate. This incremental rebate is applied to the additional property taxes incurred as a result of new construction or improvements to existing structures. Earlier this year, the program was extended, and the Neighborhood Revitalization Area was expanded, to encourage even more property owners to participate.

The Newton Fire/EMS department continues to be a leader in the emergency service field. The department has now established credibility with the medical community to enable them to provide advance life support procedures such as Rapid Sequence Intubation and use of 12-lead EKG cardiac monitoring.

The Public Works department saw the construction of a new Service Center building this year. The improvements to the Service Center will enable the department to operate more efficiently. The much-needed improvements included the

replacement of a dilapidated metal building with a new facility. Employee safety, protection of expensive equipment and operating efficiency were all enhanced by this project.

For the thirteenth consecutive year, the City's Finance Department received the Certificate of Achievement for Excellence in Financial Reporting from the Government Finance Officers Association of the United States and Canada. The Certificate of Achievement is the highest form of recognition in the area of governmental accounting and financial reporting.

Newton's recycling program continues to be a success. It has expanded this year to include a new component, which is the inclusion of a once per month collection of magazines, phone books and catalogs. Recycling tonnage collected in 2002 was 1,445 tons, an increase of 25% over 2001.

With the City's participation in REAP, which is the Regional Economic Area Partnership of seven counties in south-central Kansas, Newton has played a part in the successful Fair Fares Campaign at Wichita's Mid-Continent Airport. The Wichita Eagle has described the program as the best thing to happen to economic development in south-central Kansas in a long time. Newton City Commissioners and city staff have participated in this campaign, which has attracted low-fare air carriers to Wichita's Mid-Continent Airport, saving area fliers an estimated \$33 million.

The Lincoln School project is a shining example of a successful public/private partnership. The City facilitated the adaptive reuse of the 100-year old Lincoln School. With City assistance obtaining State funds, a private developer has transformed the property into an impressive 24-unit housing facility. This has created both additional dwelling opportunities in Newton, and it has helped stimulate the surrounding neighborhood.

Downtown Newton has also benefited from the city's willingness to work with others interested in preserving a part of Newton. In 2001, the city was approached by a group of Newton High School graduates from the class of 1965, who wanted to restore the old Fox Theatre. With the help of our city manager, and the counsel of our city attorney, this group formed a non-profit corporation called The Historic Fox Theatre of Newton, Inc. After doing some lead paint removal, and other minor repairs, the City Commission approved a contract to transfer ownership of the theater (which was donated to the City by Dickinson Theaters) for \$1.00??, to The Historic Fox Theatre of Newton, Inc. with the agreement that the theatre would be restored and used for the benefit of the community.

Finally, private developers approached the City with an exciting proposal for a 550-unit subdivision with a City golf course planned as a centerpiece and stimulus for development. After a series of public presentations and meetings, the City and County agreed to move forward with the project. As the City has proceeded planning for this project, more partners have emerged. Just recently, Kansas State University and Hutchinson Community College have

expressed interest in building an educational facility with the project to train students in their popular golf course turf management and golf course superintendents programs. When finished, this project will undoubtedly be the largest economic development project in Harvey County in many years.

It is very exciting for me to be able to address so many accomplishments from this past year. However, like many other cities in the state, we have our share of challenges in the coming year. Many of you are familiar with the state's financial crisis. Unfortunately this financial crisis has been passed down to cities and counties in the form of demand transfer cuts to units of local government. For Newton, this will mean a loss of more than \$300,000 this year, and we share the belief of those in Topeka, that this loss of revenue will be a permanent one. In many cases this short-fall has translated into cities and counties cutting important services. According to a recent survey by the National League of Cities, the funding cuts have already forced one in four cities to cut police and fire positions this year, and more cuts are expected. Although this situation will provide significant challenges, there are rays of hope in all of the uncertainty.

One of the on-going projects that we are very optimistic about is the Sand Creek project. This is a big project, and at times it may seem to be moving slowly, however, both the Commission and city staff have confidence that this endeavor will be successfully completed. The City Commission, and city staff have worked hard to cultivate a

great working relationship with our Congressional delegation in Washington, and this hard work is paying off in federal dollars for local projects, like Sand Creek.

On March 6, the City Manager, Commissioner Harris and I visited our Congressional delegation, to specifically discuss this \$7 million mandated project and other opportunities that are facing our community, and the meetings were very productive. Sand Creek, when it is finished, will be a project that this community can really be proud of. Not many other cities, especially of our size, receive federal funding for projects of this size.

In conclusion, while we do have challenges on the horizon, the challenges we are facing in Newton are those of a vibrant, growing community. Langston Hughes, a famous Kansas poet told us, "We have tomorrow before us bright like a flame." And I couldn't agree more.

I cannot put in words how much I appreciate the citizens of Newton giving me the opportunity to serve as mayor. It has been one of the most exciting and challenging years of my life. All these accomplishments would not happen without the support and guidance of Vice-Mayor Willis Heck, Commissioners Carl Harris, Todd Loescher & Grant Scott, as well as a very capable city manager and his staff. I will continue to serve this community as City Commissioner to the best of my ability.

Thank you