

Welcome to a new format for the State of the City Address.

I'm excited about having a conversation with community leaders about our accomplishments in 2015, and our direction in 2016 and beyond.

Joining me are:

- “Gus” Ahmed, a Youth Commissioner and one of the organizers of the Real Dearborn March
- Jackie Lovejoy, who is the President of the Dearborn Area Chamber of Commerce, and a member of the West Dearborn Downtown Development Authority
- Judith McNeeley, who is on the East Dearborn Downtown Development Authority, and is Vice President of Corporate and Community Partnerships for Beaumont Health
- Dave Norwood, who is our Sustainability Coordinator and liaison with the Healthy Dearborn initiative
- Mary Petlichkoff, who is chairperson of the Dearborn Federation of Neighborhood Associations, is on the City Beautiful Commission, and is a member of the Dearborn Board of Education.
- Nancy Siwik, Chair of the City Plan Commission
- Jeff Stassen, Chair of the Recreation Commission

I've asked them to be part of this presentation because I've never been comfortable with how the State of the City seemed in some ways to be too focused on me.

Working with the City Council, my role in the success of our community is to provide vision and direction, to facilitate progress and to make sure we have the resources to achieve our goals.

How we actually get work done is through collaboration.

The most important collaboration is with the City Council.

Of course, there are plenty of other elected officials and outstanding City employees who are working on your behalf every day.

But do you know we also have more than 200 volunteers serving on 30 City Commissions and Boards? They devote more than 6,000 volunteer hours each year to the good of our community and they do so without pay or prestige.

They often are the face of the City for residents seeking resolutions for the big issues in their lives, like wanting to open a business, or put an addition onto their home, or improve traffic safety on their street.

It is only at the city government level that commissioners actually have authority to make decisions, so our commissioners are a crucial part of our democratic process.

The panelists up here are just a sampling of the talent and dedication we are fortunate to have in Dearborn.

And here is a quick reminder of some of what we've accomplished – together-- just in this past year:

- Dramatically increased the occupancy rates in our two Michigan Avenue downtowns
- Eliminated user-paid parking
- Created new business authorities on Warren Avenue and in the Dix-Vernor area
- With leadership from the City Council, we added more appeal to our business districts by stepping in to reduce litter and weeds AND
- We strengthened property maintenance and snow removal requirements
- With our Economic and Community Development Department and our Downtown Authorities, we're initiating a branding campaign for our downtowns and beyond
- Restructured city departments to better serve those who want to invest in Dearborn, make improvements to their property, and maintain their homes and businesses to an appealing standard
- Continued our investment in our neighborhoods by replacing and repairing roads, water mains, sewers and sidewalks and planting trees
- We added splashpads to our neighborhood parks, with more to come
- Built more resort cabins at Camp Dearborn with more to come
- Kicked off our first Healthy Dearborn event, with more to come
- Set in motion the further development of a signature Animal Shelter
- Took early strides to building a modern dog park
- Increased the effectiveness of our street sweeping program
- Enhanced maintenance of our sewer infrastructure
- Significantly expanded the libraries' digital offerings of movies, books and magazines for all platforms, and
- Went from a few digital music titles to 270,000

- Offered laptops for check out, and installed 100 upgraded computers for library patrons
- Increased our community outreach by boosting our followers on all of our social media accounts,
- added Nextdoor to the communication mix,
- and continued to recruit more subscribers to Nixle for public safety information.
- Responded to 13 percent more calls to our Fire Department, and still beat national standards for response times
- Added police officers in our schools and increased our officers' activities in our neighborhoods
- Reduced serious crimes by 5.6 percent
- Laid the groundwork for the construction of our new Veterans Park and War Memorial and are looking forward to the dedication of this landmark project on Memorial Day

And we've accomplished all that while being good stewards of your taxpayer dollars.

- We continued to leverage tax dollars through county, state and federal grants to supplement recreation, shared services and public safety improvements. In FY15, we were awarded competitive grants totaling \$8.4 million.
- And in 2015, we moved forward with public safety initiatives funded by grants worth \$2.25 million.

But despite these and other efforts to stretch tax dollars, we certainly have financial challenges.

Even as the economy recovers, we are still impacted by the archaic way in which municipalities are funded in our state.

Acting together with the City Council, we've been able to maintain a healthy fund balance, and that's good news.

But we know we need to provide not just a balanced budget, but real value for your tax dollars.

One of the best ways to increase value is to collaborate with other communities and agencies, and share certain services in ways that just make sense.

We've already had successes with doing business like that, especially in our public safety outreach.

- Our Police Department originated the idea and was the lead department for Operation Blue Light, a multijurisdictional approach to crime prevention now involving 70 agencies in four counties.

In 2015, their combined efforts resulted in 1,000 felony arrests in the region.

And, combined, officers picked up more than 1,500 people wanted on outstanding warrants across the area.

Which is good for all of us, because we know crime has no borders.

It's no wonder this Dearborn-initiated program is recognized as a Best Practice by the U.S. Department of Justice.

- We pursued and received a \$3.2 million state grant in 2014 to pay for new radio hardware for every police officer and firefighter to improve emergency communication between public safety personnel.

This will help us meet the state's mandate for all public safety departments throughout Michigan.

- Our consolidation with Melvindale Fire/EMS has improved safety and efficiencies for both our communities
- We have been collaborating with Dearborn Heights to share the services of our MIS department, to the financial benefit of both communities, and now will expand that partnership to cover their courts and police department.
- Funded by a federal grant, we're anticipating a new emergency dispatch center to serve us and area communities here at the DAC

These types of shared endeavors strengthen our ability to deliver crucial services.

And we know the most crucial services we deliver are in support of our neighborhoods.

As we think about our combined efforts with other communities, with our own commissions and other partners, we must always be focused on strong neighborhoods.

The foundation of our community's success is being a great place to live.

This year, we've seen an increase in property values in Dearborn, and that's a positive sign for us because it means there is demand for our homes.

You'll get your assessment notice by early March reflecting these changes.

But I want to point out that while many people will see an improvement in their State Equalized Value, or SEV, of their property, they won't see much of an increase in their taxable value.

Most people will view that as good news, and I understand that.

Yet, Dearborn, as in communities throughout the state, has taken a big hit in our tax revenues since the national recession, and that continues to have a significant impact on our operations.

So, we've had to do more with less to keep every neighborhood strong and attractive.

And we have some special considerations in Dearborn because we are a city with very mature housing, built for the demands of industrial and commercial growth in a post-war era.

Plus the standards of care and expectations of property owners are not as commonly accepted as they were in the past. We need to rely more and more on our citizens to drive these efforts.

And, fortunately, we did see citizens take extraordinary initiatives in 2015 to improve our neighborhoods.

The Federation of Neighborhood Associations, which is the umbrella organization for 20 active associations across the city, plays an important role in strengthening our community. Mary, as chair of the Federation, what are some of the ways the city and residents work together?

Mary Petlichkoff

The Federation and associations are strong advocates for preserving the quality of life we have in Dearborn and we provide another voice for our residents' concerns.

One of the most important issues the Federation and neighborhood associations deal with regularly is property maintenance. We work closely with the city to help identify areas that need attention. We also help to educate neighbors about their responsibilities and direct them to city resources so they have the information they need.

We understand it can be frustrating on both sides. People say that the city should be more assertive about ticketing for litter, tall grass, trash left out, trailers in the driveway and other eyesores. I've been known to complain, myself.

Other residents feel they are picked on or are being harassed if they are written up for a violation.

We recognize that our city's inspectors have tough jobs.

Realizing this, the Federation tries to strike a reasonable balance, keeping in mind that we all want to live in a community that is well-cared for, safe and attractive. One of our biggest investments is our homes.

We were happy to see the Mayor and City Council putting more resources into the inspection team last year, adding six more field inspectors, for a total of 27 across our city.

And we know that they are out in our neighborhoods spotting and resolving problems. More than 25,000 cases were opened last year for things like trash, weeds, litter, broken cars, or improper outside storage. That's about 100 cases opened each working day by our field inspectors.

Their first step is not to penalize, but to educate. It works in the vast majority of cases. More than 91 percent of cases are resolved voluntarily. And only about 1 percent result in actual tickets.

But both the Federation and the City want to increase our education efforts to reduce the number of issues that occur in the first place.

We were glad to see southeast Dearborn hold their second neighborhood cleanup in October. They had kids and former residents participate and wide support from the schools, the city and businesses.

Following that example, the Eastborn area engaged in their first grassroots effort last May.

I am also on the City Beautiful Commission, and we encourage people to take responsibility for the look and cleanliness of our community. We're changing the emphasis of our school programs to move away from just doing Cleanup Parades, and want to inspire students to take more concrete actions to keep our city appealing.

And while property maintenance remains a priority with us, we also share ideas and concerns with every city program that impacts our community.

From traffic safety to recreational opportunities to library resources and the development of the business districts, you will find our members weighing in with the city.

The DFNA is also looking forward to closely working with the new Property Maintenance and Development Services Department.

We expect better customer service and better results with this change, and are encouraged that the administration and City Council are allocating appropriate resources for these essential areas.

Our associations recognize the importance of well-maintained neighborhoods that add value to their properties as well as providing a great quality of life in our city.

Mayor:

We want to encourage people to invest in their properties, just as the City has actively been investing in our neighborhoods.

One of our most impactful programs is offering for sale the vacant lots we've acquired that are 40 feet or less. We sell them so that they can be added to the property of adjoining home owners, who then can build driveways and garages, which reduces congestion on our neighborhood streets.

And also by creating larger lots, we can accommodate modern, more spacious houses and keep our neighborhoods appealing for home buyers in the future.

Nancy, how does the City Plan Commission help preserve the character of our neighborhoods while also encouraging new investment in them?

Nancy Siwik

The City Plan Commission makes decisions about how property is going to be used in Dearborn.

Among the ways we do that is through site plan reviews and compatibility reviews, and by responding to requests for special land uses, alley vacations, and splitting lots or combining lots.

Whenever we are considering a new proposal, we keep in mind the impacts on our neighborhoods.

We encourage people to build new homes in Dearborn, or expand and modernize their houses. When they do so, one of our jobs is to look at compatibility issues.

We do understand that some neighbors don't like to see changes on their block, but we also know that new investments add value for the surrounding neighborhood.

Applying consistent standards is one way we respect the character of our neighborhoods, while helping to move our community forward with updated housing.

As you said Mayor, the program to increase the size of residential lots has steadily been improving our neighborhoods, creating 127 side yards since the initiative began.

We try other ways to make progress in our neighborhoods. Some times that means looking at our commercial districts to see how updating our zoning codes for businesses can also benefit adjoining neighborhoods.

Last year, we took a close look at the commercial areas along Ford Road. We examined carefully what appropriate business uses should be allowed on this major state road, keeping in mind that it also abuts homes.

We rezoned the strip immediately along Ford Road to allow a little more intense business activity than before, while still prohibiting commercial intrusion into the adjoining neighborhoods.

The City Plan Commission is always concerned about protecting our neighborhoods from the traffic, noise and light that can be generated by businesses.

And that is important, because we are a very built-up community, some 98 percent of our city is developed, so there aren't too many wide open fields for investment.

I think it is important to note that as we look at land uses in our city, our guiding force is the City's Master Plan for 2030. It was approved in 2015 after extensive stakeholder input, and focuses first on ways in which to preserve and upgrade our neighborhoods.

It will help us meet the housing demands of today and in the future, including offering choices to respond to demographic changes in age, income, job mobility and household composition.

The Master Plan suggests ideas to make sure our neighborhoods are inviting for vehicles, walkers, bicyclists, and people of varying abilities.

And it sets out a roadmap to strengthen connections within and between neighborhoods in Dearborn, while still promoting their unique character.

Mayor:

Preserving our neighborhoods' distinctive qualities is important. And I think we need to recognize that the definition of neighborhoods is evolving in our town. Like the successful 200-unit student housing complex for the University of Michigan-Dearborn.

And our newest "neighborhood," the Artspace City Hall Lofts.

Judith, the East Dearborn Downtown Development Authority has been essential in making the Artspace project a reality. Tell us what's happening there.

Judith McNeeley:

We are tremendously excited that Artspace is starting up at City Hall -- with more good things about to happen.

Artspace has 35 successful sites around the country, serving 1,300 artists and their families. It has been transforming underused properties into live, work and exhibit space for artists since 1979. They are actually the largest nonprofit real estate developer in the country, so they certainly know what they are doing.

Ours is the first Artspace in Michigan, so we are breaking new ground. And a great advantage of Artspace is that it re-purposes City Hall, while preserving the traditional look of the exterior. City Hall's appearance will always be protected by a historical designation.

14 artists already have moved into City Hall, and we are anticipating most of the 53 units to be occupied by spring. In the near future, the 25,000 square feet of the concourse will feature a business incubator, galleries, studios and performance space.

With progressive developments going on in Midtown Detroit, and with Dearborn's own vibrant arts community, Artspace will bring more visitors into the east downtown for exhibits, performances and art education.

And the big benefit is that Artspace residents themselves will be invested in the life of the east downtown, and in our whole community.

Mayor:

The addition of Artspace and all of its activities will enrich our minds and spirits. But we also need to pay attention to the welfare of our bodies to be a strong community.

So now we have a broad cross section of our city working on the Healthy Dearborn initiative, which is another terrific collaborative endeavor.

Dave tell us about that.

Dave Norwood:

The Healthy Dearborn Initiative is collaboration between Beaumont Health, the City of Dearborn and the Dearborn Public Schools.

It's a groundbreaking effort, as these three partners have never worked together on something so broad a scope throughout the city.

So, we are very excited about what it can do for our City and some of the things it's done already.

Let me give you a little bit of background on how it started and why it's important to us. Beaumont Health conducted a community health needs assessment and identified four areas that they need to address: diabetes, cardiac care, obesity, and access to health care. To take this on, they brought together 100 different stakeholders

within the City of Dearborn, representing many different segments of our whole community.

They broke down in several workgroups to tackle different areas: transportation, the schools, healthy foods, healthy workplaces and healthy recreation. They have already met three times and have started generating their action plans. You'll see some of that work this summer at Homecoming, where we will be having an impact on the events and activities that you will see at the festival.

We already did something this past fall that the Mayor advocated. It was the Healthy Dearborn Bike Ride, where we had over 50 families join us for a tour of the center of our city. It was a kind of cold, blustery, October day, but everyone had a really good time.

We expect that Healthy Dearborn will have an impact on us over the next 10 years. And that's crucial, because it is clear to me that we cannot be a sustainable community if we're not a healthy community.

Mayor:

Beaumont is a leading institution in the Healthy Dearborn initiative, and in our community.

Dearborn residents may have been wondering what the transition from Oakwood to Beaumont would mean for our community. Can you offer some insight Judith?

Judith McNeeley (note this section has not been transcribed. For full details, please watch the video presentation):

- Beaumont will build upon 60 years as the hometown health provider
- New ER, rebuilt after August 2014 flood
- Free parking for visitors and patients

Mayor:

We're glad that our community is served so well by Healthy Dearborn and by Beaumont. And our own Recreation and Parks Department is one of the biggest proponents of fitness and wellness in our city.

Taking its lead from the Recreation Commission, the department strives to bring the best value to our residents, while making sure we are providing a range of innovative recreation options for all ages, interests and abilities.

Jeff what's on the horizon?

Jeff Stassen:

The entire Recreation & Parks Commission is committed to supporting Dearborn's vast array of recreational programs.

We're proud that our Recreation & Parks Department continues to be accredited by the Commission for Accreditation of Park and Recreation Agencies.

This really shows a high level of professionalism and achievement. We are one of just 142 agencies in the nation, and two in the whole state of Michigan with this distinction.

We really do strive for excellence.

To help us get there, we approved the Five-Year Recreation Master Plan last year. It sets the roadmap for us. Among the areas it emphasizes are:

- Cultural arts programs.
- And the growing importance of non-motorized trails and water trails.
That is something kind of new for us. We're anticipating that canoeing and kayaking will be offered regularly soon at Ford Field.
And we think it will be successful. People just loved the chance to canoe and kayak at Homecoming last year.

People also love the Rouge River Gateway Trail. Boy, that sure was true on that last 60 degree day we had. I couldn't believe the number of people out using the trail. And the extension of it is expected to be completed this year, allowing runners, walkers and cyclists to safely move from Ford Road all the way to Ford Field.

Soccer continues to be a growing sport. And we want our soccer teams to stay in Dearborn, especially in the winter, rather than go to other communities for their games.

So the Department commissioned a study to see if an indoor soccer field is feasible in Dearborn. We expect to have a recommendation this spring.

Among our highest priorities is to make sure we are offering plenty of options for our youth and young families.

- The two splash pads we opened in 2015 at Crowley and Hemlock parks were big hits. A third splash pad at Whitmore-Bolles is planned for later this year.
- We are also making our playgrounds better, replacing equipment at 23 of our 43 parks in 2016 beginning with Alber-Bingham, Canterbury, and Edison.
- And for a new twist on Recreation, we've been presenting enrichment classes and mini-camps for children.
- And one of our best success stories is the Summer Camps at the Ford Community & Performing Arts Center. Both kids and parents look forward to them. All eight sessions were sold out in the summer of 2015. We think they work so well because they are modern evolution of our Playground Programs, meeting the expectations of today's families.

Of course, our focus isn't just on children and youth.

- Our Fitness Area continues to be well used. People visit more than 19,000 times each month.
- A major improvement at The Center in 2015 was the replacement of the complete circuit of Selectorized strength equipment. Our original equipment was purchased back in 2001 when The Center first opened.
- We're renovating the Hubbard Ballroom with features to make it more elegant and versatile. We're doing this to meet more sophisticated banquet hall standards—we all remember that it started out as a Roller Rink -- and also so residents can host their celebrations and create family memories.

In keeping with tonight's theme of collaboration and partnerships, I really want to give credit to the nine sports and six cultural arts groups that partner with the Recreation & Parks Department.

Without them, we couldn't offer the robust variety and depth of opportunities we have for physical and social development, across all ages.

The efforts of the Recreation & Parks Department, our Commission, and our partnership groups help to make our community much richer in the choices Dearborn families, adults and senior citizens have to stay healthy and have fun.

Mayor:

And while our Recreation Department offers so many dynamic options, there are plenty of other ways to get hearts pumping and feet moving in Dearborn. That's true for our residents and everyone who visits or works or goes to school here.

You can walk our tree-lined streets; dine at our restaurants; shop at our stores; experience our night life; stroll through our visitor attractions and -- explore our downtowns.

And after a busy year of progress in those downtowns, you just might be surprised at what you'll discover.

Jackie and Judith can tell us about what's been happening along the Michigan Avenue corridor.

Jackie Lovejoy:

Our occupancy rates in west Dearborn have soared over the last year, and we are expecting even more good news in 2016, with it rising to 88 percent. That's better than pre-Recession levels.

Among the businesses you may have seen in west Dearborn are:

NAR Bar
Famous Burger
Brera Pizza
Stadium restaurant
Los Galanes
Dearborn Brewing
Abbey Lane Condos
Brome Burgers
Lue Thai Café
Downtown Deli

Dearborn Brewing
Venture Title Company
and Paint and Pour.

Some existing businesses also spruced up their properties. Bailey's Bar and Grill remodeled, and Biergarten had extensive façade improvements. Kabuki restaurant expanded its outdoor seating.

For 2016, expected openings include the

Hampton Inn

Bar Louie

a bakery

medical office

a mixed use project in the former Howell's building,

development on the former Brothers Tuxedo location,

and Ford's Garage, which is a welcome addition to Dearborn and capitalizes on our automotive heritage. That's headed for the vacant property near the train station.

We will still have our free outdoor concerts and Food Truck rallies at the Bryant Plaza, which really bring in a lot of visitors. We usually have 1,000 people at those. We will also continue the Chamber's Farmers and Artisan Market every Friday during the season.

We're glad to see the revitalization of the west downtown, and eager to continue to be part of the downtown branding initiative that will promote a fantastic positive story about our community.

Also glad to be part of the Main Street Program that is uniting our two Michigan Avenue downtowns.

The Chamber had tremendous success collaborating with the downtowns and our own members for the Shop Small program last November and we look forward to more collaborative efforts with the WDDDA and EDDDA.

Meanwhile the Chamber is promoting the Discover Dearborn App and hosting community events, like Family Fun Day, Taste of Dearborn, Educator of the Year Award and the Scavenger Hunt.

I know Judith can let us know about all the good things that are happening on the east side of town.

Judith:

In the east Dearborn downtown and surrounding area, we saw eight new businesses open during 2015, and more activity is expected in 2016, especially as Artspace gets established. We already know Artspace boosted the selling price of the former 50/50 building along Schaefer.

Several longtime businesses have invested in their properties. Alcamo's added a seating area, and Top Dog is promoting its popular Jazz Nights on Fridays.

New businesses include

Baba's Grill

Good Burger

Sheeba Restaurant

Alano's Pizza and Subs

Salon New Look

Dream Fashion

Orient Bazaar

and Yogurtopia.

Senior housing is also planned for east downtown.

And the property on Schaefer in front of Dearborn Town Center is under consideration for an art-related site, to take advantage of Artspace's momentum.

We will be continuing our incredibly popular summer Jazz on the Ave concerts at City Hall Park. We've hosted as many as 3,000 music lovers in one evening.

And we're looking to expand events at the park to bring in even more visitors to the business district.

Like Jackie, I am also excited about the branding initiatives and other collaborations between the two Michigan Avenue downtowns and look for visible progress in 2016.

And, also glad to see that the two DDDAs will have more allies in boosting business districts in Dearborn, now that the Corridor Authorities for Dix-Vernor, as well as Warren Avenue, have been established.

Mayor:

We're encouraged by the creation of the Corridor Authorities, too.

That means business will be determining the future of their commercial districts, with the city's support.

This is something we've been working on for a long time, and believe this collaboration will be a huge boost for preserving and promoting these areas, and tapping into their tremendous potential.

As we look at our commercial districts, we also know that we've got to continue to modernize our approach to business investment.

One way we are doing that is through a state program called Redevelopment Ready Communities.

A huge focus of this program is to reduce barriers that might have hampered innovative business development in the past.

What are some ways that we are doing that Nancy?

Nancy Siwik:

From the Plan Commission's point of view, it starts with thinking about how commercial property can be used within districts zoned for business, like our downtowns.

We want to concentrate instead on flexibility and agility, and recruit desirable businesses by being less restrictive and more responsive.

We've had successes with this approach already —think of the Dearborn Town Center, and even Artspace in east downtown. And others are being proposed for the west downtown.

The Plan Commission has had to review these proposals for mixed use developments on a case by case basis.

Having a consistent means of reviewing and approving multi-use proposals will give us more opportunities for economic development.

This is especially true as we think about entrepreneurs and artisans, who, by their very nature, are always thinking “outside of the box.”

The Master Plan touches on some of the economic development initiatives that Jackie and Judith referred to, such as unifying Michigan Avenue as Dearborn’s “Main Street.”

The Master Plan suggests we create a strong sense of place in our downtowns. A sense of place is something we have been hearing a lot about, and acting on, over the last few years.

Among the tactical steps we can focus on is slowing traffic, projecting a feeling that plenty of activity is going on in our downtowns, and encouraging social interaction.

The Master Plan also has a vision for commercial areas beyond our downtowns. They should become Destination Districts – places where people don’t just go to get their errands done, but to also have enjoyable experiences.

Mayor:

We are certainly stewards of our developed landscape, but we must also be stewards of our natural environment.

We’ve already been successful at laying the foundation for alternative energy projects and other green initiatives that have the possibility to boost our local economy.

We want to promote Dearborn as a forward-thinking community, and one that is environmentally-friendly.

And that could help us attract even more young families to our city.

Dave, tell us about some of the projects we’re pursuing

Dave Norwood:

Dearborn is considered to be a leader regarding sustainability. We've earned this reputation through activities like making sure we can replace all our LED streetlights at a competitive price point, and by working with several state agencies to show that we can manage our energy and put together plans that keep our costs down. We are known even at a national level, after working with several different federal agencies to secure funding for local sustainable initiatives.

Among the local projects that I would like to highlight is the grant we received a few years ago to do a waste-to-energy study. What that means is we look to partner with the Great Lakes Water Authority to use our waste that we generate through our sewage, or other waste that's organic in nature, to create power. This could help power the industrial sectors of our town, whether it's our steel mill or the F-150 assembly plant.

Another project that is a little bit smaller in scale, but no less important, is Adopt-A-Watt. This is a partnership with a non-profit organization where we were able to complete three different projects in town, replacing energy inefficient lighting with energy efficient lighting. This occurred in our downtown parking decks, in the parking lot behind Henry Ford Centennial Library, and in the parking lot behind the Dearborn Administrative Center. These energy-saving projects were funded by sponsorships through collaboration between the City and the private sector in town.

Another initiative in the early stages is with the East Dearborn Downtown Development Authority, which is looking to renovate the parking lots that are in the business district. Rather than just repairing them to provide parking, the business owners are looking to do something more. They want to create an opportunity for development. Also, they want to pursue this development in a sustainable manner. So we are going to be constructing some parking lots with green infrastructure in a way that's never been done anywhere else in the state. It's a very exciting project for us.

We also recently acted upon a grant we received to plant trees in the City of Dearborn. Our trees took a beating when we had the Emerald Ash Borer, but we pursued and received a grant to replace 125 trees on public rights of way.

Another recent productive collaboration is a grant we received from the state to look at our community energy management. This is a partnership between the City of Dearborn, the Southeastern Michigan Regional Energy Office and Eco Works. We are planning to reduce our energy bills by 10 percent a year over the next five years.

A really exciting project, on a much larger scale, that was recently passed and adopted by the mayor and the City Council, is the solar panel project. This is a groundbreaking project where we will be the largest solar panel project in Wayne and Oakland counties. Almost a megawatt of power will be produced by panels that will be

installed on the roof of the Ford Community & Performing Arts Center and on carports that you will see constructed between the theater and the police and court building.

Most residents are proud of our curbside recycling program in which we use 96 gallon carts. That project has resulted in an increase in 40 percent by volume of recyclable materials. But we want to go even higher. So we have partnered with the Dearborn Public Schools to do a pilot project in four elementary schools this spring. We will offer recycling education, not only for the students, but for the staff, to help them make this much-anticipated project successful.

Mayor:

School recycling is one of those great collaborations between the city, school district and our young people.

Tapping into the enthusiasm of our students is one sure way to keep us looking toward the future.

Gus, you and the other student leaders did a great job with The Real Dearborn March.

I know you are committed to making sure people in and outside of Dearborn understand the true nature of our community.

From your perspective, tell us why you believe in Dearborn.

Ghassan Ahmed:

As a junior at Edsel Ford high school, students are provided with an opportunity to learn, achieve academic success, and prepare for their future in the Dearborn school district.

Many students I know have been accepted to excellent universities as a result of the chance to achieve success inside and outside of the Dearborn Public Schools.

I have had the great pleasure to be taught by a few phenomenal teachers and be a part of a diverse population of minds and cultures that I can draw experiences and ideas from at Edsel Ford. There are also many groups that I am so grateful to for giving me the opportunity to contribute to my school and community.

One great example is the Dearborn Youth Affairs Commission, for which Mr. Norwood serves as an advisor. On the Commission, students, Dearborn schools, and

the City work together. We create positive events, like “Dearborn’s Got Talent,” which bring people from all around Dearborn to appreciate the skills and talents of our students. In March, we will be collecting books for refugees through the Books For Hope campaign in partnership with the Social Justice Club at Edsel Ford High School.

Although I'm not part of this particular program, I can vouch that Pockets of Perception - or POP - is an art program that brings together students from all of Dearborn's high schools. They learn about each other and work together to create public artwork that enhances our city. You can see their projects at City Hall, the Pocket Park, and the train station. Their powerful designs reflect our community's traditions and unity.

In Dearborn, we are united through our diversity. Many people are unaware of how our community works together so well. So in response, students from Edsel Ford, Fordson, Dearborn, and Divine Child high schools came together through The Real Dearborn march to reject the stereotypes and negative representation of Dearborn in the media, and promote Dearborn's true identity.

Students and adults from all of Dearborn marched in the bitter cold. While I carried the march’s banner in my frozen fingers, I felt a deep sense of pride that my community would so staunchly support our cause.

Our diversity in ethnicity, culture, and religion only serves our Dearborn community with more perspectives to collectively work together and get things done.

Our identities are a part of who we are as a community but they do not define us nor stop us from coming together to share and communicate with one another.

These organizations and accomplishments show the impact students’ creativity and ingenuity can have if we are given a chance to contribute.

Our diverse population only makes for a dynamic and talented environment where ideas can be fostered that other cities don't have. As students, we know how great our community is and we want to help make it better.

Mayor

The strength of our community is that we embrace each other as neighbors and friends, and we welcome anyone who chooses to be part of Dearborn.

We're always willing to build positive relationships based on our shared goals, and to work together to create something lasting in our community.

Our young people like Gus get that. So it should give us great hope for our future.

As we've seen tonight, our future will not be determined just by what takes place here at the Dearborn Administrative Center.

Rather, it will be determined by people like these community leaders up here with me, and people like you who are engaged in and have a stake in the long-term success of Dearborn.

At its best, our form of government depends upon active participation and constructive collaboration.

We embrace that standard and strive to live up to it every single day. Not because we have to, but because we want to.

We make better decisions when we make them together; we foster stronger neighborhoods when we protect them together; we achieve more rewarding goals when we pursue them together.

I'm very proud of all of the accomplishments we've shared tonight, and of the promise of those we see in the near future.

But, I'm more proud of the path we've taken to realize those accomplishments.

There isn't any challenge we can't overcome; any opportunity we can't leverage; any vision we can't attain, if we are committed to working with one another as partners in pursuit of what's best for all.

Our founders coined this concept E Pluribus Unum. **Out of Many, One**

Here, we simply call it the Real Dearborn. Thank you.