

# **La Center's Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow**

State of the City Speech  
Mayor James T. Irish

Members of the City Council, City Staff, members of the Planning Commission, representatives of Clark County and neighboring cities, school districts, civic organizations and local citizens , and last but not least by all means, our Southwest district representative of the Governors' Office -- good evening and welcome. I am Jim Irish, and as Mayor, I have the tremendous honor to share with you some of the recent accomplishments of the City of La Center, and some of the things your City is doing to move into a prosperous tomorrow.

But first, will you please stand while the La Center American Legion Post 189 does us the honor of posting the colors of this great and free country.

Now please join me in saying the Pledge of Allegiance.

Thank you. Please be seated.

This year, we celebrate our Centennial. For 100 years, La Center has faced challenges and created new opportunities for its citizens. Now, we enter our second century with pride for what we have accomplished. But we know that we cannot sit back and take our achievements for granted, for there is much to do as we face with excitement the new challenges that lie ahead.

This community began even more than 100 years ago. The indigenous people and the settlers who developed this area had a true pioneer spirit. They saw the beauty of the land, the abundant wildlife and the jewel of the river. They discovered the richness of the soil and what it produced, and they knew that this was a perfect place to settle and raise a family.

Over the years, La Center has had its ups and downs, but we have built a strong community, full of people who share the spirit of our first settlers, confident in the knowledge that we can make this an even better place for our children and grandchildren.

My vision is to build a sustainable community that promotes public health and safety, economic growth, diversification, parks and recreation, library services, efficient utilities, and appropriate and fair land use administration, and protects the livability, environment, and uniqueness in this historic place. That is quite a mouthful, but in short, we want La Center to grow as a wonderful place to work, to bring up a family, and to enjoy the diverse opportunities in the City.

20 years ago, La Center's future looked uncertain, and the City was on the verge of financial collapse. But when our City leaders opened the doors to the non-tribal casinos, we forged a unique partnership to benefit the citizens of our community. This partnership has remained strong. And with that relationship and all the other businesses in La Center, we have prospered, and our citizens have come to enjoy a quality of life and city services that we are all proud of. La Center's appreciation for all of our local businesses remains strong as we move forward to even greater economic growth.

But it is wise to remain alert, to look for ways to build on these and other opportunities to create a vital future. La Center is a strong community, and with committed citizens and leaders we will make that happen. I call upon the current City leaders to have the same courage and integrity today as those in the 100 yester-years in securing La Center's future. The nation was in a difficult economic situation when the City took a bold step and approved the gaming ordinance. The current times call for equally bold and courageous leadership.

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Your City has a tremendous team that is working hard to implement an economic development strategy, enhance health safety and livability, address critical facility and staffing needs and re-energize citizen participation. The staff and elected officials have prepared us to get through this difficult economic time, and to build a foundation for better times ahead.

- Last year, we updated the *Comprehensive Plan* and *Capital Facilities Plan* after a nearly three-year effort. After a decade of dedicated effort, we now have the I-5 junction included in these plans.

In 2007, the Clark County Board of Commissioners approved an extension of La Center's Urban Growth Area out to I-5, including all four corners of the Junction. This is a logical expansion for the City, and it will provide an ideal location for our future commercial and industrial development that we have recognized as essential to diversify our economy and provide employment opportunities. At the same time, the UGA expansion will preserve the business and residential core of the City north of the river.

The expansion to the junction is currently tied up in the Courts, based on an appeal of Clark County's approval of these changes and similar plans in other cities. We have joined forces with Clark County and property owners from various parts of the County to appeal this decision to the Superior Court so that we can pursue this needed economic opportunity.

- In 2008, the city approved five annexations and added 80 acres to the City.
- We also completed the City's first economic plan. The plan calls for significant investment in roads and sewers at the junction to make those properties "shovel-ready" for commercial and industrial development. But it also points out that the City has to do more than just hang out a shingle that says "Business Wanted."
- La Center, along with the cities of Battleground and Ridgefield and the Port of Ridgefield, sponsored an economic Development Exposition. It was one of the best attended events in Clark County in 2008.
- Available and affordable wastewater treatment is a cornerstone of that economic development. Two and a half years ago, we took over ownership of the wastewater treatment plant. We are now expanding and improving the plant to double its capacity and protect the health of the East Fork of the Lewis River. This expansion will support growth for City businesses, and also facilitate development of the La Center I-5 Junction. We are currently out for bid on this phase of expansion, and the City Council will be selecting a contractor in the next few weeks.

- To support the cost of this project, the City secured a low interest loan for \$10 million, and we have requested additional grant funding through the state's stimulus package. We are doing everything we can to make these needed improvements with the smallest possible cost to our sewer customers.
- We completed nearly \$2.5 million in road improvements last summer. This included safety improvements for school children, parents and buses, and street re-surfacing and repair on Pacific Highway and 4<sup>th</sup> Street.
- The City, School District and the Vista Ridge Home Owners Association Members developed a stewardship partnership this spring.
- La Center continues to enjoy the highest standards of service any city in the state. Our parks, law enforcement, schools, fire protection and community involvement are truly outstanding. I am very proud of the staff that works for La Center. They are special people – carefully selected and committed to their jobs and the citizens of our community.

I would like to take a moment to recognize some of the staff and leaders who make this all possible:

- Our Police Department, under the leadership of Chief Tim Hopkin, continues to help us be one of the lowest crime rate cities for our size in the Western Hemisphere -- maybe even the galaxy!
- Our Finance Director, Suzanne Levis, does a terrific job of managing the City's finances. Even though La Center has supported our local banks, through her actions alone she was able to keep the City's investments safe by quickly moving \$4 million in CD's into the Local Government Investment Pool, out of the Bank of Clark County and before it collapsed.
- Jeff Sarvis is our Public Works Director. Jeff and his staff keep our streets, parks, drainage systems and public buildings in tip-top shape. Jeff has also spent countless hours helping to design and prepare for our sewer expansion.
- Sue Lawrence has done a fantastic job since she came on board as our Wastewater System Supervisor. She has squeezed every last drop of efficiency out of our sewer plant, and helped Jeff to design a world class facility for our expansion.
- Our City Planner, Dale Miller, has kept up on all of the day-to-day details of the City's planning and permitting processes, and directing the process of updating our Comprehensive Plan.
- Our commissions and committees are made up of citizen volunteers who give a lot of time and effort in doing their part to make this City – Your City – as great as it is.

I want to recognize the members of the Planning Commission:

Greg Thornton, Chair  
 Al Luiz, Vice-Chair  
 Sandy Perrott, Secretary  
 Raymond Denny, Randall Williams, and Amy Chase

Also, the members of the Civil Service Commission:

Chairperson Earl Bowen  
 Barbara Thacker and Roger Price

Our Salary Commission:

Past-Chairperson Erin Nolan

Mike Larsh, Randy Goolsby, Ken Hickman and Rick Davis

And the Wetland Stewardship Volunteer Project Coordinator: Barbara Vining

Let's have a big round of applause for all of these wonderful volunteers!

- We are also proud to have Mark Mansell as our superintendent of the La Center School District -- making sure that our children get the best opportunity for learning from their teachers.
- Clark County Fire and Rescue – besides cooking a fantastic breakfast for the Our Days Morning, they put their life on the line at any given response to a call out, for the City of La Center and their District.
- And finally, I want to thank you, the citizens who, if you didn't care wouldn't be here tonight -- so pat yourself on the back and accept my many heartfelt thanks.

When you look at La Center and our accomplishments, we have much to be proud of. Just in the last 20 years, the changes have been dramatic.

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Moving forward this year, we are working on the next stages of the City's growth. As a follow-up to last year's economic development plan, we are identifying specific improvements needed to open our I-5 junction to development. Our planning and engineering staff led by Bart Stepp, the city Engineer, are developing a Sub-Area Plan for the area around the I-5 Junction. We will also explore our funding options -- to ensure a suitable economic return on any City investments.

- We anticipate annexing another 68 acres along the City's east-side this year, and we will complete a half-mile trail along Brezee Creek. Eventually, we will have 26 miles of trail system in the City.
- The sewer project is on track, and construction will begin this spring. The new Membrane Bio Reactor system will facilitate our planned Growth, and first and foremost protect the environmental quality of the East Fork of the Lewis River.
- We are partnering with other jurisdictions in the county to update regulations protecting the shorelines of the East Fork Lewis River and its tributaries.

We are also facing many challenges that La Center's settlers could not imagine. Issues regarding the environment, significant population growth, and a faltering economy raise many questions and uncertainty. Yet while economic times are unstable, La Center has worked to establish and maintain a Reserve Fund that helps assure our ability to preserve services and quality of life. But we must take a conservative approach, and we have -- by deferring some of the projects and staffing that we might like to see funded, until the overall economy is stable.

Keeping these things in mind, the budget approved by the City Council for 2009 is fiscally conservative, but it still places an emphasis on our most important priority – sustaining livability through services the City provides. Economic diversification, maintenance of current infrastructure and expansion of the City's wastewater treatment plant are the goals for 2009. The budget for this year will take us in the right direction to meet our needs and build for future generations.

We also face the challenges of the proposed Cowlitz tribal casino and resort. It seems like this project has been hanging over our heads for a very long time, but it is, we have been told, grinding to a decision in the federal process. We have stated our concerns very clearly and in great detail during the federal process of reviewing the Tribe's request for their land to be taken into trust. Now we have a responsibility to work to get the best possible package in place to protect the City, our local businesses and the citizens in case it is approved.

If the federal government approves the request to take the land into trust, then La Center needs to make the tribal development a part of the economic development picture that will unfold at the Junction. I hope that, if the federal government approves the Cowlitz proposal, we will have been wise enough to secure the City's future by negotiating adequate mitigation – real mitigation that protects our community from the impacts that decision could have on La Center. We will be the Tribe's closest neighbor, and we could experience the greatest impacts, positive and negative, if this project goes forward. However, if the request is denied, then the City would not have lost any time or momentum in planning for and securing our economic future at the La Center Junction. The Cowlitz Tribe will still own the land at the Junction and with the possible industrial or/and commercial development of the land, will still be our neighbors.

What will the next 100 years bring? No one can say exactly, but I know that it will be a challenge and it will be exciting! The settlers that moved here faced many challenges, and our citizens did not abandon the area when times became tough. We must face our future with the same enthusiasm, and La Center is positioned to do well in the coming years. During the past several years, we have set the course for a dynamic and sustainable La Center. We have faced the challenge of expanding our financial base, managing the inevitable growth, and expanding financial stability and jobs to preserve and enhance our way of life.

The overall financial and economic health of our City continues to be excellent. We are well positioned to move into our second century with dedication and purpose. La Center has taken the initiative to shape and direct its growth and sustainability for future generations. We have stepped up to the challenges, and we will continue to do so. But the efforts of our elected officials and staff are only as good as the input we receive from our citizens. I urge all of you to be involved in the issues that are important to you. Support your schools and the volunteer organizations that are so vital to the fabric of our community.

Stay in touch with your City government as we try to find the best path forward. Give us your ideas, and let us know if you think we are headed in the wrong direction. I was once told by a citizen that elected officials were elected to make the decisions because they were more informed -- having the information put in front of them that the public does not have. If this is true, then we have done a poor job of communicating. I promised you that I would have an open door and I do -- every first and third Wednesday from 6:30 to 7:30 pm at City Hall-- so come on down and talk, write an e-mail or call me or my staff. We want to know your thoughts, concerns and ideas so that we can do a better job of serving you.

I am Irish and I am an optimist. I see what we have achieved and what we are capable of achieving for the City and for our citizens. I hope that you share in this vision of what La Center can be for ourselves, our children, and our grandchildren.

We have laid a strong foundation for our future over the last 100 years, and especially over the last 20 years. We are creating the infrastructure to support this future. The City Council, my dedicated staff, and I are working together with many citizen volunteers for the greater good of La Center, come join us.

As a father and a grandfather, I know that the best legacy I can leave for my grandchildren is to work to secure a strong and bright future for La Center so that when they leave for higher education or to broaden their horizons, they will be excited to come back – home in La Center. I urge you to join with me in that effort to keep La Center the jewel on the East Fork of the Lewis River.

Five years ago I brought before you our new city logo blending together all that La Center represents. Two years ago, I had the honor to unveil the new flag of the City of La Center. Tonight, I am pleased to present for the first time the Centennial Flag for the City. **This flag represents the importance of La Center's past, and the lessons it gives us for today. With this rich history, we are well prepared to meet the challenges of tomorrow.**

As you look at this OUR great nations flag, please remember in your heart all of the veterans, and those now serving on active duty, throughout our nation and abroad, who have made tonight a possibility, the freedom to hold a public meeting and offer a prayer to Our Almighty God for their safe return.

Good night and thank you for joining us this evening.