

State of the City Address
Mayor Ken Miyagishima
February 24, 2016

Good afternoon. Thank you all for being here. It's an honor to speak with you today.

First of all, welcome. Bienvenidos and a heart-felt thanks to my colleagues on the city council, to members of our city staff, and to all our fellow citizens who are in attendance today or watching at home. I especially want to welcome and thank my wife and first lady, Rosie Miyagishima, for your love, support and inspiration. Our oldest son John is also with us. It's a special pleasure for me to introduce my parents, Mike and Catalina Miyagishima, my brother James, and my father- and mother-in-law, Ruben and Hortencia Reza. Although the rest of my children are not here with me today, I want to wish my daughter, Danielle, a happy belated birthday!

I am pleased to report today that the state of our city is strong.

In previous State of the City addresses I have pointed to some of the key elements of that strength, which include our careful fiscal stewardship; the vision and commitment of our city council; the outstanding managerial skills of City Manager Robert Garza; the hard work and dedication of city staff; and the high level of interest and participation by our residents. All of those elements continue to be very much in place.

I have also had the pleasure, in previous years, of pointing to recent achievements. The past year has again brought exceptional progress.

The new civic plaza should be substantially complete by early this summer. We have approved the Amador Próximo re-development zone just west of downtown. The new East Mesa Public Safety Campus is under construction on Sonoma Ranch Boulevard, and the Intermodal Transit Center is in full operation. A major regional health clinic is moving into the former city office building and federal offices will occupy the old city hall.

These accomplishments are important individually for what they bring to our city. They also reflect important commitments we've made in recent years to our city's future and quality of life.

One of those commitments has been to city and regional planning. This planning has helped guide future growth and development, supporting efficient infrastructure and productive use of resources. It is also intended to give greater freedom and choice for our residents, especially in terms of housing, transportation and community life.

Another commitment, hopefully familiar to all of us by now, has been to openness and transparency in all levels of city decision-making. As just one example, last week saw a series of public charrettes in which Las Cruces residents reviewed and enhanced the Master Plan for downtown and surrounding neighborhoods.

Our commitment to public engagement has led to spirited discussions and longer meetings, but it has also made our public initiatives consistently stronger and more reflective of what residents want, helping us avoid unintended consequences and costly mistakes.

Another commitment has been to a good quality of life for all our residents. As part of this effort, we have continued to expand recreational facilities, ranging from the large open space being developed behind the Las Cruces Dam to the network of bike and walking trails that crisscross our city. Residents continue to enjoy our popular recreation facilities, including the Aquatic Center, our senior centers, and athletic fields.

Some of you may have attended the Domenici Conference last fall. The Conference, held annually on the NMSU campus, features some of the top public policy experts in the country. Last year's participants stressed the importance of ongoing public investment, especially in infrastructure and education. These elements, we were told, are the key factors in building a solid future not just for local communities but our nation as a whole.

I was happy to hear this because the decision to invest in ourselves is one of the most important commitments we've made as a city. It has been responsible for much of our progress to date and is essential for future success. That willingness to invest forms a large part of what I want to discuss with you today,

Investment, by definition, involves using current resources to produce long-term returns. A recent example occurred two years ago, when the city was forced by the governor and legislature to raise the Gross Receipts Tax to make up for the loss of Hold Harmless revenues. The remedy provided to local municipalities by that legislation created a surplus in city revenue.

Understanding the surplus to be temporary, we decided to invest the additional resources in initiatives that will reduce long term costs for the city: through energy projects that lower future utility bills, through economic development projects that yield a clear return on investment, and through an initiative that creates a regular schedule for the repair and maintenance of city streets, prioritizing those streets most in need of repair. Resurfacing those streets now will result in many more years of service before they need complete reconstruction.

By taking advantage of low interest rates, lower construction costs and the excellent credit rating for the city, we have just launched the largest street maintenance project in the city's history. This will provide not only long-awaited repairs on local streets, but clear logic and predictability to the order of improvements. Most important, regular maintenance now will save us millions of dollars in comparison to what it would cost to substantially rebuild those streets at a later date.

I always think of the old AAMCO transmission commercials on television, with the slogan "Pay me now, or pay me later." It's a good investment when you can spend far

less money now than you would in the future – and that’s exactly what we, as a city, have done.

The same principle applies to new fire stations we’ve built in recent years. Besides making us safer, they helped the city achieve the highest possible fire service rating, which in turn lowers insurance costs for homeowners and businesses. Our switch to LED bulbs in 13 city buildings is another example. Due to lower power usage, the initial investment will be paid off in three years, and will continue to save the City \$30,000 annually. Our project to upgrade thousands of streetlights to LED is projected to save, at current electric rates, even more – about a quarter of a million dollars a year.

The benefits of a new recreational facility or long-awaited street improvement are readily apparent, and they fit our expectations of what a city does. At the same time, there are other investments we are making that, while less visible, may prove equally important over time.

One example is our decision last year to join Doña Ana County and the state Attorney General in contesting a rate hike requested by El Paso Electric. Significantly, we decided to contest not just an increase in rates for the city itself, but to intervene on behalf of all ratepayers living in the service area.

The attorneys hired to represent us responded with diligence, so much so that while the utility had requested a rate increase of \$8.5 million dollars, the hearing examiner, after hearing testimony, recommended a rate hike of only \$640,000, a difference of almost 8 million dollars. The final judgment by the Public Regulation Commission has not been made, but it’s almost certain that our involvement in the case will result in substantial real dollar savings for the people of our city.

It’s important that we continue to intervene in these cases, including in the rate hike already proposed for 2017. In my view, the El Paso Electric business plan, developed during another era, is poorly adapted to the rapidly changing energy economy that we now inhabit. A special problem is the company’s choice to prioritize the construction of expensive new power plants rather than control peak demand through conservation and market incentives. Worse, this strategy threatens to lock consumers into paying for unnecessary generation capacity for decades to come.

Testimony presented at the recent rate hearing indicated that a modern business plan, one that avoids the construction of power plants by incorporating expanded time-of-use rates and new consumer-friendly technologies, could save area ratepayers hundreds of millions of dollars in coming years. Our efforts to keep that money in the pockets of local residents and business owners represent, in and of themselves, a powerful investment in the economic future of Southern New Mexico.

It’s not just the city, of course, that has been investing in the people of our community. Local individuals, organizations and partnerships have made significant investments of

time and effort on our behalf, addressing issues of deep importance to our entire community.

One of these initiatives has been led by the Teen Pregnancy Prevention Work Group. Many of us will remember that only a few years ago Doña Ana County had the highest teen birth rate in New Mexico. Thanks to dozens of teachers, nurses, social workers and community advocates, working with our legislators, school administrators and public health organizations, Doña Ana County is no longer near the top of that list. Since 2005, when the Teen Pregnancy Work Group was formed, there has been a 66% decrease in births for 15 to 17 year olds in Doña Ana County, and a 39% decrease in births for 18 and 19 year olds.

This is a remarkable achievement, and a good example for all of us of what strategic prevention-based investment can do. It will save us money for social services, of course, but even more importantly, it will enormously improve the options for young women in our community. Earl Nissen, the chair of the Work Group, is with us today. Thank you, Dr. Nissen, for your committee's work. Thanks, too, to our school health centers and community partners, including the local school districts and community health organizations who made this achievement possible.

Another major investment in our community is being coordinated by the Success Partnership, a consortium of parents, teachers, students, school administrators, nonprofits, businesses, health organizations and individuals from throughout the community – all of whom have taken on the responsibility of making sure our children are successful in school and in life.

Two of the Partnership's working groups I would especially like to mention are Early Childhood Education and Community Schools.

We have learned that the first few years of life are when our brains grow and develop, creating neural pathways that we will use for a lifetime. This is the point at which we can have maximum impact on our children's future. The Early Childhood Working Group represents a county-wide effort to help parents – the child's first and best teachers – ensure their children's cognitive and emotional development. Adequate nutrition for mothers and children; ready access to health care; the early identification of vision, hearing and learning challenges; a formal commitment to early childhood education – these are investments that will pay off many times over in coming years.

A second key initiative for the Success Partnership involves Community Schools, which brings together dozens of organizations – from the Girls & Boys Clubs to the United Way of Southern New Mexico to New Mexico State University – to help make our local school buildings hubs of activity for their surrounding neighborhoods. These local schools, already important in our children's lives, have the potential for engaging neighboring residents of all ages with recreational activities, health and workforce services, civic engagement, and life-long educational opportunities.

As a city, we applaud the Las Cruces Public Schools for working with the Success Partnership on this important project. Three leaders of Ngage New Mexico, the nonprofit providing organizational structure for the Partnership are with us: Executive Director Frank Lopez and program directors Cindy Corona and David Greenberg. Thank you for coming today – please let us know how the city can contribute to this important investment in our children’s future.

Education, of course, is of special importance to me personally. I grew up in a family without a lot of financial resources, only a few blocks from Conlee Elementary School. My education at home, in the Las Cruces Public Schools, and at New Mexico State University has played an enormous role in providing the many opportunities I’ve enjoyed as an adult.

Some of you may know that I visit, every year, all third grade classrooms in the city. I go to promote the Mayor’s Fitness and Nutrition Program, and while I’m there every student and I sign an individual commitment that he or she will stay in school until they graduate.

Those visits are highlights of my week. I wish everyone could accompany me to those classrooms and see how serious the students are when they sign that commitment. I wish you could see how eager they are to engage with learning, to be strong and independent, and to take on the tasks of the world.

But they can’t do it on their own. We need to hold up our end of the bargain as well. There’s no reason Las Cruces and Doña Ana County can’t be national leaders in making sure all our children are prepared for kindergarten, learn to read, succeed academically, graduate from high school, and both enter and complete a successful college or career program. This is clearly one of the most important things we can do for the future of our community.

There will always be people who are skeptical of this kind of investment. They will try to convince us that we’re only responsible for ourselves. They will argue that the best way to build an economy is with low wages and rock-bottom taxes. They see many of the challenges we face in our community as insurmountable, and believe the only way we can advance is by leaving many behind.

I have to admit that I am completely baffled by this point of view.

When I look at our city, I see endless opportunity. We live at the intersection of two interstate highways and less than an hour from an international airport. A major rail hub is taking shape at our southern doorstep. We have an outstanding state university and a well-developed community college system. We have a diverse workforce and are served by a robust and creative business community. State and federal entities like the White Sands Missile Range have provided a stable wage base for generations of local residents, offsetting some of the worst effects of national recessions, and giving us time to help other parts of our economy grow.

In terms of natural advantages, we enjoy an abundance of the very energy resources that will power our future: solar, geothermal and wind. We are surrounded by productive farmland and a beautiful landscape. We have a culture and lifestyle that make people want to live here – both long-term residents and people new to our region. We also have what modern retirees most seem to want: a clean environment and outdoor recreation opportunities, the opportunity for educational enrichment, and an active cultural and public life.

Many of these advantages come into special focus as both industry and rail lines expand on the border, potentially linking Pacific ports in Mexico with southern Doña Ana County.

In addition to border-related opportunities in finance, logistics and transportation, we will have an opportunity to define ourselves uniquely and even more favorably within the region, as a prosperous center for education, medical care and quality of life.

These are tremendous advantages for our community. The only thing we need is a vision large enough to reach our full potential, and a willingness to make the kind of investments that vision requires. That is a challenge we are determined to meet.

We've reviewed today some of our many shared accomplishments as a community. We've underlined the importance of continued investment in our people and future, and touched on just a few areas where that investment is taking place. We've brought to mind some of our many advantages as a city and region, which can help inspire us in the work still ahead.

These are large commitments, and inevitably they make me think of all the third graders I've visited through the years. I think of their parents and hard-working teachers, the classroom aides and cafeteria workers, and all the other people who get to see them every day. It's not hard for us to understand how precious those children are, and know that we will do everything in our power to help them succeed.

I'll have to say, though, after the eight years I've been mayor, and the 22 years I've been in public office; after my 3 decades in business and all the time we've shared as neighbors, I know that it's not just the children who are important to us all.

I find myself thinking of a young mother in our community out looking for work. She deserves our investment too. She deserves a safe neighborhood for her family and a good school for her children. She deserves educational and career opportunities for herself.

And then, of course, I think of all the other workers in our community, who show up every day to staff our businesses and nonprofits, our construction crews and operating rooms, our mail routes and newspapers and schools. They deserve our investment too,

and that includes a wage that allows them to lead successful lives, and participate fully in the economic life of our community.

I think of our retirees, people who have made important contributions to their communities over the years, and have decided on our city for their next phase in life. I think of our college students and the excitement that comes with their living and learning among us. It's always good when they find their place in the world, wherever it might be. I'll admit that it's a special pleasure to see the growing number that stay in Las Cruces, choosing our own community as the place they spend their lives.

Inevitably, then, I think about our neighbors who struggle with their mental or physical health. I think of those who are in chronic pain or have lost their sense of purpose, those in trouble who need a second chance. They too, were once bright-eyed and eager grade schoolers, enjoying a time when their own preciousness was never in doubt. We need to remember our neighbors' value to us even as they struggle, and know that they are wholly worthy of our investment and concern.

This sense of valuing and caring for one another, whatever our station and circumstances in life, is yet one more advantage we share as a community.

It's the special sauce that drives and enlivens everything we do together, and one of the major reasons this is a special place to live.

Again, we appreciate that the speakers at the Domenici Conference validated the importance of our continued investment. We know that investment in infrastructure will save money for taxpayers. We know that investment in education will create a more productive workforce. We know that our investments in quality of life will make our community more attractive to high wage businesses. These are good and important outcomes for a city to have.

Ultimately, though, we invest in one another because that's what great communities do. That's why we build streets and parks and fire stations, why we decide to take on a large utility and its outdated rate structure, why we reduce teenage pregnancies and invest in our children. We seek to make sure that every resident – that's *every* resident – has as many opportunities as possible to live a good and fulfilling life. That's our common task and the commitment we make to one another. That's why the state of our city is strong. I know that the work of our council and staff, the directions we set and the decisions we make, are only a small part of the efforts being made every day by the people of our city; by those who devote large parts of their lives to making our community better. What I can promise is that we will continue, individually and as your representatives, to do everything in our power to join you in that effort, and continue to make this a great place to live.

Thank you for joining me here today, and thank you for the opportunity to serve as your mayor. Let's move forward with confidence on the tasks we have ahead.