

Mayor John F. Cook
State of the City Address
May 18, 2011

STATE OF THE CITY 2011 – SPEECH

A Decade of Renaissance

One of my favorite mayoral programs is called “The Mayor’s Book-a-Week Club.” Hundreds of elementary school children have joined the club and made a commitment to read. Usually after getting a class to sign up, I allow the students to ask questions. Typical questions are: “Do you live in a mansion? Do you have bodyguards? Do you have a chauffeur?” But, recently a first grader at Dr. Sue Shook Elementary asked: “When did you finish school?”

I explained I finished elementary school in 1960, graduated high school in 1964, graduated the Defense Language Institute in 1968, college in 1977, and got my teaching certification in 1992.

The first grader looked up and said: “Wow! Way back in the 1900’s.”

I share this story to illustrate how quickly time passes. We are eleven years into this new century.

Aldous Huxley once observed that: “*Most human beings have an almost infinite capacity for taking things for granted.*” With that in mind, I

thought it important that we reflect on what has changed since this new century and our *Decade of Renaissance* began.

But first of all, let us identify the agents of change, the ambassadors of this Renaissance. The cornerstone of our Renaissance begins with our citizens. We depend on community involvement to select public servants whose only agenda is to move the city forward and to operate an efficient and effective local government. You took an important step when you amended the charter to go to a manager council form of government and four-year terms of office.

The City depends on you, the citizens, to help us govern. You must insist on a City Council dedicated to good policy and stewardship. You deserve a management team with great “know-how” in the City Manager’s office and her executive staff. You also deserve the hard work of all City employees. And we certainly appreciate the impact our 66 registered neighborhood associations have had on your municipal government. You helped us receive national recognition as an “All America City” where everyone has a seat at the table.

With the key strategies of reviving our downtown, protecting and enhancing our parks and open space, and improving mobility, we’ve made great strides during our cultural and economic Renaissance.

Charles C. Noble once said: **“You must have long range goals to keep you from being frustrated by short-range failures”**.

In 2005, as part of a strategic planning session, the administration laid out a very progressive ten-year capital improvement plan. That program, consisting of more than 200 construction projects is evaluated annually to assess our financial position, re-examine our priorities and authorize the necessary debt to pay for the projects. These projects include quality of life, municipal facilities, public safety, and transportation infrastructure. Over the past decade we have spent over \$ 679 million making our community a better place. \$100 million of that was for critical street and drainage infrastructure and over \$12 million was spent enhancing our three city-owned International Bridges.

In the year 2000, the voters of El Paso passed an unprecedented \$141 million in quality of life bonds. With the completion of the Africa exhibit at the El Paso Zoo, we have now completed all **146 projects**. New and rehabilitated parks, libraries, and museums are an enhancement to quality of life and help us attract and retain industry.

Additionally, we have been very progressive in our approach to protecting open space, improving our parks, promoting green initiatives and implementing smart code.

The last 10 years have seen dramatic improvements and better maintenance of our city parks and open space. We have added **more than 200 acres** of parkland, updated our parkland dedication ordinance, changed the subdivision codes and have provided “Smart Growth” form-based alternatives to assure that we don’t just build houses, but develop walk-able communities with convenient and accessible parks. The Public Service

Board is moving forward on its plans to develop a real retirement community around Painted Dunes Golf Course, which will feature plenty of natural open space.

Green initiatives have also been a priority. The City completed three LEED Silver certified buildings – the Cielo Vista Library and the Mission Valley and Glory Road transit terminals. This means our buildings will have less water and energy use. It also means the new structures created less waste while they were under construction. Every new City building will meet this goal.

Additionally, the City has purchased 46 hybrid and alternative-fuel vehicles, one all electric-powered vehicle and 32 electric vehicle charging stations and at the Clint Landfill we have a gas recovery system under construction. By changing out lighting in facilities, heating seven of our pools using solar-power, and lighting up every traffic signal in town with LED bulbs, we've reduce our energy use by 28 percent!

And I cannot talk about green initiatives without mentioning the Housing Authority. They were selected the winning design at the National Green Design Competition to rebuild the vacant Paisano Community into a state-of-the-art, net zero, LEED Platinum community for the elderly and persons with disabilities.

In order to become a great renaissance city, it was critical that we had focused mobility goals and plans to accomplish them. To that end, we set out in 2005 to create the **Camino Real Regional Mobility Authority**

(**CRRMA**). The RMA was of crucial importance because it has bonding authority that does not encumber the city's financial resources. Their first project, the \$354 million **Spur 601 Liberty Expressway**, using new tools in TxDOT's financial tool chest, is the largest pass through financing project in the state's history and was completed on time and on budget. What traditionally would have taken 15 to 20 years to build, we accomplished in a little over five years. That public/private joint venture, which was critical to accommodating the growth of Fort Bliss, has given El Paso recognition around the State and the Nation and served as the model of how to get projects built quickly.

We were the first city in Texas to establish Transportation Reinvestment Zones, another new tool in TxDOT's tool box, allowing us to commit \$71 million of future tax revenues as the city's investment to leverage State and Federal funding for a billion dollar Comprehensive Mobility Plan. That plan addresses everything from hike and bike trails, to highway construction, to a great mass transit system.

Speaking of Mass Transit, Sun Metro, which was on the verge of a complete meltdown in 2006, has undergone a dramatic transformation thanks to strategic investment and best management practices. We've leveraged local funds, aggressively pursued millions of dollars from the Federal Transit Administration, and benefited from First Transit's management expertise to turn the system around with a revitalized operation that is focused on reliability, convenience, and professional customer service. We've invested millions of dollars on a number of improvements including purchasing 103

new compressed natural gas buses. And our investments are paying off as ridership and satisfaction continues to move in a positive direction.

Amenities such as free Wi-Fi, waiting areas with refrigerated air conditioning and heating, ticket vending machines, real-time bus schedule information on large TV monitors can be found in our new state-of-the-art Glory Road, Westside , Downtown and Mission Valley transfer centers.

We've promised El Pasoans a 21st Century Rapid Transit System and we've been working very diligently to keep that promise.

The next step in Sun Metro's evolution will be a premier form of transportation known as **Rapid Transit System, or RTS**, along Alameda, Mesa, Montana and Dyer. Our RTS will use rubber-tire, high capacity vehicles, improved fare collection systems, and controlled traffic signals to move riders more efficiently.

Mobility is an essential component of our Renaissance, a Renaissance that will help us attract and retain industry and achieve our Economic Development goals.

Any city in search of Renaissance must have plans that include a vibrant Downtown

What began as Betty Moor MacGuire's dream to save a page out of our past, the restoration of the Plaza Theater marked the true beginning of our downtown Renaissance. That project was quickly followed by Jim Scherr's

investment in the blighted International Hotel, transforming it into a beautiful Doubletree hotel.

Among the largest revitalization projects is Paul Foster's Mills Plaza District Development, featuring the complete restoration of the historic Anson Mills Building, the adjoining Centre Building and will eventually include the historic Plaza Hotel and amenities such as a pedestrian promenade. In addition, much-needed downtown parking has been added in an adjoining multistory garage.

Downtown revitalization without a residential component is doomed. The nine upscale condos in the First Avenue lofts, with contemporary urban living on the upper floors and retail opportunities on the ground floor, were significantly important to downtown's revitalization. And it's exciting that the ninety-one units at the Magoffin Park Villas will be complete in September. On top of that, we'll continue a partnership between the artist community and Artspace Inc., a leading nonprofit real estate developer, to build live-work units in Downtown.

Public, private, and philanthropic investment of more than \$236 million is revitalizing our city's core and preserving our history. The Downtown is already becoming a happening place where a new generation will make memories that will last a lifetime. I'm reminded of Petula Clark's lyrics:

"Just listen to the music of the traffic in the city.

Linger on the sidewalk where the neon lights are pretty.

How can you lose?

The lights are much brighter there. You can forget all your troubles. Forget all your cares and go “Downtown.”

Don't worry, Richard, I'm not going to break out my guitar and sing even though our downtown is becoming something to sing about!

All the positives we've talked about so far have been accomplished with the goal of improving our quality of life and our economy.

But, just as the global and national economies have experienced a downturn since mid 2008—our region, although somewhat insulated, has certainly been impacted. The City has not only had to tighten our belt, we've had to poke some new holes in it. But despite that belt tightening we've continued to provide excellent service.

Our citizens are squeezed by the recession too.

With an unemployment rate that topped out at 9.9% in January, I find little consolation knowing that our rate has been equal to or lower than the national rate of unemployment for the last three years—even though that's a phenomenon that our community has not experienced in more than three decades.

So what are we doing about it?

The City of El Paso and the El Paso Regional Economic Development Corporation (REDCo) share the responsibility for the city's economic development efforts. The City works on expansion and retention of existing business while REDCo, a stand-alone 501 Corporation spun off from the chamber, is responsible for attracting and recruiting new companies to the region. Since its inception REDCo has helped to attract over 6,000 good paying jobs to El Paso, creating new payroll of over \$187 million and a capital investment surpassing \$129 million.

The global economic slowdown and violence in our sister city has made it difficult to continue the progress REDCo made in its early years, but I remain optimistic that once the world's economic engines are fully engaged, we will be well positioned to benefit.

I say this because we've seen a dramatic increase in interest from business and industry contemplating a relocation or new start up in our community. More than 180 corporations are considering a location in El Paso-- about a third of which have short-listed our community as a potential site.

In my role as mayor of one of the most dynamic cities on the border with Mexico, I find myself constantly challenged to dispel the myth that border cities are not safe. Not only has El Paso been ranked in the top three safest cities for more than a decade, we finally knocked Honolulu out of the top spot to become the safest large city in the U.S.

From San Diego to Brownsville, border cities are some of the most secure in the nation, yet we must deal with perceptions that paint a different picture.

It is even more frustrating when misleading comments are made by Texas officials who should have a better understanding of border dynamics.

Recently, I was asked to appear on Geraldo Rivera's show to discuss border cities. Geraldo introduced me as the mayor of El Paso, the city on the border with the most dangerous city in the hemisphere, and asked; "Mayor Cook, how dangerous is it living in a border city?"

I admitted that life in a border city could be very dangerous and offered the example of Detroit, the murder capital of the United States, and it's on the border with Canada.

The Greater El Paso region is the center for economic activity in West Texas, Southern New Mexico and Northern Mexico. As the 19th largest city in the U.S., and with more than 2.3 million people within a 50-mile radius, El Paso represents one of the largest international borderplexes in the world. El Paso's county-wide population has grown to more than 800,000. That's more than a 17% increase since 2000. And according the UTEP Borderplex forecast, our economy is expected to reach \$23.4 billion in 2011.

So, let's talk about the drivers that will take us to that economic level.

Our two major economic drivers are the Maquilla Industry and Fort Bliss.

The El Paso – Ciudad Juarez Borderplex is one of the busiest in terms of commercial trade and passenger traffic between the U.S. and Mexico.

Juarez historically has been a good indicator of what we can expect on our side of the border. Despite the cartel violence, the Juarez maquila industry continues to lead Mexico in almost every indicator of industrial activity, has gained 13,000 new jobs in March and April of this year and has had no recorded cartel violence in the manufacturing area.

We've seen a 14.2% increase in truck traffic since 2009. This contributed to more than 19 million northbound border crossings in 2010 (pedestrians & vehicles)

More than \$69.4 Billion in U.S.-Mexico trade crossed through the ports in the El Paso region in 2010. This was a 47% increase from 2009 and is now 18% of all U.S. Mexico Trade

As one of only three cities in the nation to recoup the number of jobs we lost during the recession, we need to understand the impact Juarez has on El Paso's jobs.

More than 50,000 jobs in El Paso are directly tied to the economy of Mexico!

I came to El Paso via Fort Bliss, so am I pretty proud of what they've become since I was stationed here in 1968. The multibillion-dollar expansion makes it the nation's fastest growing Army post. That growth is one of the contributing factors to our region's economic stability. Fort Bliss is gaining more troops than any other post in the Army as a result of **Base**

Realignment and Closure (BRAC), Grow the Army, and Army Modular Redesign.

Including soldiers, family members and civilian employees, Fort Bliss' population will be close to 100,000 in a city of 800,000 by the time the post expansion is complete. This kind of growth is as unprecedented for El Paso as it is for the Army.

While manufacturing and the military are definitely the 500 lb gorillas of our economy, they are not our only economic assets. Let me talk about a couple of others.

We have talked about many things that make El Paso great. Without a doubt one of the city's and this region's greatest assets for the past nearly 100 years is The University of Texas at El Paso. UTEP has been highly successful in fulfilling its mission to create educational opportunities and serve as a catalyst for human and economic development in this region. UTEP's current student body of 22,000 reflects steady enrollment growth over the past decade and mirrors the demographics of the population of this region.

In fact, UTEP ranks second in the nation in the number of degrees awarded to Hispanics, and these graduates prove time and time again that they can compete with anybody, anywhere. Just last Saturday, UTEP awarded a diploma to its 100,000th graduate!

Just think about the impact that those 100,000 degrees have had on the lives of the graduates and their families. Being a class of '77 alumni, I can attest to the opportunities my degree made possible.

And UTEP is an economic driver, generating \$369 million in business volume, providing 7,000 jobs and \$452 million in household income in this region.

One of our community goals should be to assure UTEP becomes a Tier One Institution.

Most cities are happy to have one institution of higher education. El Paso is blessed with two and a renowned community college.

Tech University Health Sciences Center has become a driving force in strengthening El Paso's economic base and increasing the number of healthcare specialists within the region.

In 1997 I was blessed to participate in an economic development summit. Local business leaders and elected officials brainstormed ways to place El Paso *prominently* on the Texas map – where we *knew* it belonged. The result of that Summit was the goal of becoming the *Medical Mecca* for West Texas, Southern New Mexico and Northern Mexico. To achieve that, we would have to grow the regional campus of Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center into El Paso's full-fledged, four-year medical school. That became a reality and thanks to Paul Foster's \$50 million gift the future of the school is secure. And with the Hunt family's gift; the Gayle Greve Hunt

School of Nursing is on the campus of the only four-year medical school on the U.S./Mexico border.

In the coming years, Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center at El Paso, University Medical Center, Medical Center of the Americas Foundation and the El Paso Children's Hospital will be the catalysts for achieving first-rate medical care in the region, training more physicians and delivering quality health care to El Pasoans.

If time would allow I'd brag about El Paso International Airport, our Police and Fire Departments, the Housing Authority, our Metropolitan Planning Organization, Workforce Solutions, the El Paso Water and Stormwater Utilities, and on and on, but unfortunately my time is limited and a Decade of Renaissance is a lot of territory to cover.

So, in closing let's recognize that folks around the country have taken notice. President Obama has visited us twice in eight months and used El Paso to kick off the immigration reform debate. Last year's Sun Bowl game was a phenomenal success. Thousands of visitors enjoyed our beautiful city when they came for the U.S. Women's Bowling Conference and the Conference USA Basketball tournament.

Now, as we reflect on the many goals we've accomplished since we entered this new century, we should also address one of the biggest challenges that lay ahead.

Henry Ford once said that: “Before everything else, getting ready is the secret of success.”

Knowing that education is the great equalizer, I call the entire community to action to solve our problem of high school drop outs. The current statistics are just plain unacceptable and we can't expect teachers and parents to bear the burden alone. We need to inspire our young people to not only stay in school, but to pursue college or post secondary education. We must instill in them hope, nurture their confidence, and help them overcome obstacles.

Imagine for a moment an El Paso where education is the top priority of every citizen: An El Paso where the entire community supports our students in pursuing a college or career education: an El Paso where every student is on the path to higher education. But, don't just imagine. Let's make it happen!

On Friday, May 20th, we will join the rest of the State by proclaiming it Generation TX Day. On that day I am calling on all El Pasoans to wear your favorite college T-shirt, painting a powerful picture of an entire community's united support for higher education. Let's show our students how higher education unites our community and what these students mean for the future of El Paso. And someday a mayor will give a State of the City Address that brags that El Paso has the highest rate of college graduates in the country!