

State of the City Address

Mayor Ken Miyagishima

March 28, 2018

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

First of all, welcome. Bienvenidos todos. As always, I want to express deep appreciation to my colleagues on the city council, to members of our city staff, and to our fellow citizens in attendance or watching at home. I especially want to welcome and thank my wife and first lady, Rosie Miyagishima, for your love, support and inspiration.

As many of you know, my father passed away recently, which was a big loss for me and my family. During his final weeks we experienced the careful attention of nurses and doctors, the closeness of loved ones, and the concern and best wishes of all of you with whom we've shared our lives over so many years.

As most of you know, too, we lost former City Councilor Olga Pedroza recently as well. Olga was a true champion for the people of our community, a hardworking councilor, and a friend who is deeply mourned by all who knew her. We find it hard to believe she is gone.

It's at times like this that we turn to music for inspiration and solace, and I want to thank the Singing Out Choir for their wonderful performance today. We really appreciate your being here.

Not long ago Rosie and I had the privilege of attending the choir's Winter Concert. The songs that they just sang come from other parts of the world but they remind us of something closer to home, and that's the power of community in shaping and giving meaning to our lives.

As the notes on the song sheets indicate, one of the meanings of Ubuntu, the title of the second song, is that "a person is a person through other people". This may seem a strange formulation, especially when our own culture puts so much emphasis on the individual, but it has powerful implications for us as a community, and for the relationship we have as a city with the people we serve.

Clearly some of our residents just want to be left alone, pursuing their particular goals and paths through life with as little interaction with others as possible.

We are reminded, though, that this independence takes form and is enacted within a larger community, and within a structure created and maintained by countless others. Streets are built and sewer lines repaired; trash is picked up; our community's children are educated to be respectful neighbors and daily contributors to our lives. We pursue our individual dreams with the confidence that clean water will flow from our faucets, that we will live safely within our homes and neighborhoods, and that our police officers and fire fighters will respond quickly and with courage when emergencies occur.

In all of these ways our individual paths through life are facilitated by the support of others, whoever we are and whatever we hope to be.

At the same time, there's much more to a great community than these essential services.

Many of you may have read about Blue Zones, regions in the world where people live longer than average lives with a high level of reported wellbeing. Studies reveal that Blue Zone communities share certain characteristics, including regular physical activity as a part of daily life, the opportunity to interact often with one another, and residents who have a sense of purpose in their lives.

We have come to similar understandings in our own evolution as a city. One result has been our commitment to a vibrant downtown, with restaurants and brewpubs, and a lively mixture of museums, galleries and shops. Our new Civic Plaza has already become the go-to place for rallies and public celebrations, from food truck roundups to Nights Out with law enforcement and fire fighters, to celebrating our Aggies' recent victory in the Arizona Bowl.

This downtown core is complemented by other areas around the city: parks and ball fields and shopping areas, the university and our community college campuses, wherever people gather to work or study, to play and enjoy community life. These public areas are in turn being connected with

one another by well-planned transit corridors, with access to public transportation, safe sidewalks, and a rapidly growing network of trails for walking and bikes.

We love our cars, but getting outside with others is an important part of staying healthy and connected with other people. This is especially important for our children, and I commend our Complete Streets and Safe Routes to Schools initiatives for giving all of us a chance to be more active and engaged in daily life.

A particularly exciting initiative we've undertaken, in cooperation with the Las Cruces Public Schools, is our Community School program, in which local schools become neighborhood hubs for education, recreation, and community life throughout the city. I would like you to join me in recognizing School Board President Ed Frank, VP Terry Dallman, Board member Ray Jaramillo and Deputy Superintendent Gabe Jacques. Thank you for your work on community schools, and congratulations on the large number of people supporting the recent school bond issue – it shows the confidence we have in your leadership, and the importance of the work that you do.

There is much to be proud of as we move through the city: an increasingly beautiful and active downtown, a new public safety complex in Sonoma Ranch, the orange barrels that come with the largest street maintenance and repair initiative in city history. Underlying all this, of course, has been solid attention to the nuts and bolts of efficient administration. Process isn't always the most interesting of topics, but it's what makes possible all that we do.

In every State of the City address I make sure to mention – because it's important – the key role good financial stewardship has played in our success. I'm grateful to the City Council and staff for your careful management of available resources, and we especially appreciate, over the last year, the leadership in this area by City Manager Ed and his administrative team.

All that has been accomplished during the last decade, including through a severe national economic crisis, has been accomplished efficiently and within projected budgets, and all while we maintained over twice the financial reserve required by the state. Good administration and careful

management of taxpayer resources are easy to take for granted, but they require discipline and steady reinvestment as opportunities emerge.

One of these opportunities has come in the form of falling prices for renewable energy. In the last year and a half the city has added over 1 megawatt of solar panels to city buildings. I would like to continue this process until we meet virtually all of our electrical needs through energy efficiency, time of use rates and renewable resources. Besides saving taxpayer money, we want to play a leadership role in our region's transition to renewable energy, creating high paying jobs and solid careers for local workers.

Energy costs are a concern not just for city government, but for households and businesses. City intervention in rate cases and related filings involving El Paso Electric has been an important factor in making these costs more affordable for area residents.

It's important to understand that rate hearings brought before the Public Regulation Commission are adversarial in nature, which means that cost increases must be contested in order for their reasonableness to be fully examined by the Commission.

For many years the city intervened in rate hearings on its own behalf, contesting rate increases for streetlights and other uses of electricity in city operations. Three years ago the city council made the important decision to intervene on behalf of all our residents, which resulted, beginning with the 2015 rate case, in savings of \$7.5 million dollars a year for area ratepayers. These are recurring savings, which means our actions will save ratepayers \$75 million dollars over a ten year period. In addition, last year El Paso Electric announced that it would delay a proposed rate hike for at least two years, saving ratepayers well over 10 million dollars more for these two years alone.

These are significant savings for the people of our community.

We have been joined in these interventions by Doña Ana County, and I want to express deep appreciation to our county commissioners for their partnership in this area. As interveners we have used our separate legal teams strategically and for great benefit to local residents.

This is a good example of what public entities can do: stand up for local residents in ways that would be difficult for an individual to do on her own.

Sometimes changes in process point to new areas of emphasis in city policy. A little over a year ago City Manager Ed reorganized city administration to create a department for Economic Development, and by the end of this year Las Cruces businesses will access all permit and licensing services through an efficient, centralized Service Center. This has been a goal for me, and for our councilors, for several years, and we appreciate the progress that has been made here and in so many areas of service to the business community.

This commitment to service is part of an even larger change in focus for the city, one that I believe will be a major step forward for us all.

You may remember that in past State of the City addresses I expressed hope that residents contacting the city would someday receive the same level of customer service as that provided by a five star hotel.

The council took me at my word and recently revised our city mission statement to read:

“The mission of the City of Las Cruces is to provide customer-focused services to residents, businesses, and guests so they can experience a ‘quality of place’ to live, work and play.”

There are two important elements in this statement. The first is to view residents as valued customers when they interact with the city.

This represents a real change in orientation compared to how many cities operate.

Instead of instituting top down procedures and endlessly explaining to residents why the rules have to be the way they are, staff has committed themselves to looking at every process and procedure from the resident’s point of view, with a goal of top-level service for everyone coming into contact with the city.

To support that commitment City Manager Ed has instituted a Peak Performance plan for city staff, in which progress on city priorities is

assessed and evaluated through clear measurement standards, so we can see whether or not goals have been accomplished.

We are also encouraging immediate feedback on city performance. A new Ask Las Cruces mobile app provides easy-to-access forms to report problems or complaints, which are then routed to the proper department for faster service. A new email address, *qualityofplace@las-cruces.org*, has been set up too, and is available prominently on our city website, so residents can write directly to city staff. In both cases, our goal is to acknowledge receipt of the message within 24 hours, and to track each communication until the issue is resolved.

The second part of the mission statement refers to creating a high “quality of place” for all of our residents. This includes the development of much that I mentioned earlier, like our new plaza and active downtown; our parks and recreational facilities; our new walking paths and community schools.

There’s something else, though, that goes into quality of place that’s important, and it’s what the choir sang to us about today. It’s something I’ve thought about often over my lifetime in this city. I’ve thought about it especially during my father’s illness, as we experienced not just professionalism from the medical staff that attended to us, but real personal caring as well.

I think about it too as we remember Councilor Pedroza, who always recognized the realness and importance of everyone she met. The people Olga served weren’t constituents to her so much as fellow human beings, and important co-creators of this life we get to share.

So, even as we strive for excellence in customer service, I know that the people of this community are much more than passive consumers. We are the owners, custodians, and guiding force of this complex human endeavor called the City of Las Cruces. We are the ones charged with creating this reality we inhabit, and ultimately responsible for what it becomes.

At the most basic level, of course, we choose the Board of Directors for the enterprise, selecting our mayor and council in elections held every two years.

Councilors in turn make policy decisions that set direction for the city. All of this occurs within a larger context of who we are as a community, and the kind of relationships we seek with one another. For the past decade that I've served as mayor, and in an evolution supported by successive elections, our residents have guided us toward ever-deeper relationship with one another, and ever-higher aspirations for what a city can be.

One of those directions has been toward more open and transparent government, where all residents are fully informed about opportunities and challenges the city is facing. It's based on our belief that better decisions are made when everyone participates, and that we participate more effectively when we are fully informed.

This commitment to transparency and full participation is embedded in all that we do. As we go through the Plan4Las Cruces process, it's hard to open up the Sun-News without seeing an article about meetings and workshops to plan area transit or Community Development, or set neighborhood priorities for any general obligation bond we might decide to pursue.

The key questions that we keep asking our residents, in dozens of different ways, are "What does Quality of Place mean for you, and what steps can we take together to make that vision a reality?"

Some shared understandings of that Quality of Place have already found a place in decisions we've made. Not surprisingly, they reflect long-term community values of respect and openness, and a deepening interest in one another and the substance of our lives.

A few years ago we decided, and have had reaffirmed in subsequent elections, that we want a fair hourly wage for all of our workers, for all those who care for our children and elders, who prepare our food and stock our store shelves, for those who build the structures of our city and keep them in good repair.

We've decided too on an economic policy that prioritizes local businesses, the entrepreneurs who have elected to make their homes here, and join us daily in building a strong community. We want to take advantage of local strengths like our workers' hard work and ingenuity; our close proximity to rapidly expanding industry along our southern border; our great state

university and federal facilities; our local agriculture and beautiful public lands.

We're eager to welcome new companies, of course, but we understand that their coming here is dependent on the quality of our life and schools, and the readiness and productivity of our workforce.

This, too, is a challenge that we're meeting together, as our business community, educators, and nonprofits work to develop a real pathway to success for our children. Lori Martinez of the Success Partnership and Tracey Bryan of the Bridge of Southern New Mexico, are two key leaders in this important initiative. Although they could not be with us today, I would like to publically thank them for the work that they do.

Our goal for development as a whole, as envisioned in the Plan4Las Cruces planning process, is to build a healthy community, with economic prosperity and sustainable growth, all occurring within a context that reflects the character of our community. This in turn requires nurturing vital relationships: with ourselves and the environment we live in; with the present moment and future generations; with all the other people who share our daily lives.

So when we talk about improved customer service, what we're really talking about is the quality of our relationships, in this case between a city staff member and the resident he or she serves. It's the same quality of relationship that we aspire to with everyone – fellow human beings experiencing the uniqueness and opportunity of each moment together, along with our very human ability to solve problems with creativity and respect.

I'm not saying it will always be easy. Some things can be taken care of quickly, while others are harder to figure out. There are bound to be differences of opinion: one neighbor wants Codes to make another neighbor cut his weeds, while that other neighbor wants Codes to go away. That's when we depend on the long-term capital of our relationships with one another, which is all that any community of people ultimately has.

Quality of place, then, comes not just from new buildings or brilliant sunsets but from the richness of lives lived together, and from the thousands of

human moments we share. It comes from our willingness to be important to others, and to allow others to be important to us.

That's why we want our planning and development to consistently facilitate human contact rather than limit it. We want our decision-making to include more people rather than less. We want higher, rather than lower, incomes for our neighbors, and ever improving opportunities for us all.

I mentioned earlier our commitment to open government and transparency; in 2017 Las Cruces was named the most transparent city in the state by the New Mexico Foundation for Open Government. I've mentioned our commitment to financial stewardship and administrative excellence; last year WalletHub named Las Cruces the sixth best-run city in the country. The same organization named us the Safest City in New Mexico, as we experienced a 6% decrease in both violent and property crime during 2017. We are used to being named a top location for retirement; last year we were named by GoodCall one of the Best Cities for K-12 Teachers as well.

Statistics change from year to year, and it's hard to know what to make of some of these rankings, but I'm proud that others are aware of what we're doing as a city.

At a time when government is being questioned and demeaned at a national level, top performance is important. Our achievements demonstrate on a daily basis what can be accomplished together, and what a strong force shared commitment can be.

In a larger cultural climate of distraction and division, I'm glad that we've chosen to keep re-investing in ourselves and one another, deepening the human ties that bind us and give meaning to our lives. I'm reassured that we keep finding more to appreciate in our neighbors; I'm proud that we remain a city open and committed to everyone, whatever our age or gender or ethnicity; our citizenship status or religion; whether we're grouchy or good-natured or just busy; however we might seek happiness or choose others to love.

It is because of these qualities of our community, and the shared hard work that have made our achievements possible, that I stand before you today and declare with confidence: the state of our city is strong.

That's why we look forward with such excitement to our future together, and such eagerness for what's still to come.

Thanks again to the Singing Out choir for your wonderful performance.

Thanks to all of you for making this a great city.

Thank you for your friendship and kindness to my family, and for the opportunity to serve as your mayor.