

Knox County Mayor Mike Ragsdale
State of the Community

Hardin Valley Academy
May 14, 2008

Chairman Strickland, I appreciate the kind introduction. I want to thank our Chairman for his leadership. He is the first African American Commission Chair in Knox County's history. Tank, you are creating a great legacy for our community.

I would also like to recognize my partners in government, members of the Commission and Board of Education. I am grateful for your service to our county.

We gather this morning to discuss the state of our community...to reflect on the past year and chart our path for the future.

This year, our county has been tested in many ways and from many different angles. Looking ahead, we face a critical decision. We can choose a wasted path that hinders progress. Or we can move forward with resilience and act with a purpose.

I hope we make the choice to take advantage of our opportunities. To do this, we must work together as allies rather than adversaries.

Today, how is the state of our community? I'll let you decide...

In Knox County, more than 50,000 seniors chose to remain active and engaged by visiting our senior centers.

Over 2,500 individuals attended our first regional Senior Summit focusing on fraud and abuse. It was a great success! Tomorrow, we will host our second summit, and we are anticipating an even larger crowd!

To our Attorney General, Randy Nichols, thank you for your leadership in making this a reality.

Registration for Imagination Library continues to place us among the highest performing communities in the country with nearly 16,000 participants.

Together, we have created over 30,000 new regional jobs, and Knox County has the state's lowest unemployment rate.

I am very proud that our students' test scores on the ACT are above both the state and national averages.

Our flu immunization program vaccinated more than 30,000 school children. Our health department is a national model in protecting the health of our community.

With more than 3,000 acres of park space and 41 parks, over 2 million citizens visited our green spaces this year...2 million! Our sports programs drew nearly 20,000 participants. From youth baseball and cheerleading to adult soccer, what a great way to keep people of all ages active!

Since my last State of the Community, our Legacy Parks Foundation has raised almost \$800,000 in private funds. The foundation also acquired more than 155 acres of new land.

Our DUI litter pick-up saw huge numbers this year with almost 1,200 miles of road cleaned. This Pre-trial and Probation program saved taxpayers almost \$50,000!

Our convenience centers allowed citizens to recycle over 10 million pounds of paper, plastic, and metal.

We have more than 5,500 volunteers who spend their time reading with children, enhancing our parks, and ensuring a fair community grants process.

Absolutely, we have had our obstacles, but I can say with certainty the state of Knox County is good. In a number of areas, we are truly leading the way and setting the bar for communities across our nation.

I have always believed that cooperation produces results. The County and the City continue to reap the benefits of a "great working relationship." Mayor Bill Haslam, it is a pleasure to serve with you. Your friendship is very important to me.

This year, by working together, the County and City made real progress with both beneficial policies and valuable amenities. We came to an agreement on an innovative stormwater ordinance. We opened a hugely successful skate park. We listened to the ideas and concerns of citizens at our joint neighborhood conference.

We will do even more in the coming year.

Chairman Strickland mentioned that my Mom is here today. She and my Dad are very special to me.

Second to my faith, the greatest gift my parents gave me was the opportunity to get an education.

Mom grew up in Calhoun, Tennessee. She never had the opportunity to graduate from high school. She left school to work and help support her family. Mom is one of the most gifted and giving people I have ever known. From the very beginning, she insisted I go to college.

I can remember this so well. Before I ever started school, I would sit in Mom's lap early every morning while she read books to me. We had a limited selection of books. In fact, we only had two! I memorized the Davy Crockett book very quickly!

Soon, we found ourselves riding the bus to the public library in downtown Cleveland. There we checked out books about historical figures, great athletes, and superheroes. It opened up the world to me. Mom understood the importance of an education and dreamed big dreams for her only child.

When you've had the kind of year I have, believe me, you need a great Mom!

Mom, when I needed encouragement you were there. And when I needed a kick in the rear, well you were certainly good at providing that as well.

Not only do I love you but I am also very proud of you.

Like my Mom, I feel a strong sense of responsibility to give all kids a top-notch education...to make certain that the quality of a child's education is never determined by their zip code.

Last year, we saw the long overdue reform of the Basic Education Plan or BEP. As a result, our schools received \$19 million in additional revenue. This increase in funding just didn't happen because we wished it. When brought to my attention, our office mobilized!

Hundreds of people worked for years to correct a gross inequity. This required the support of our Legislators, Commissioners, Board of Education, and, most importantly, the involvement of citizens who were tireless in communicating their concerns.

Because of BEP funding:

We paid our teachers better. We provided for an emergency alert notification system. We expanded our highly successful Pre-Kindergarten program. Our young children are more prepared than ever when entering school.

We know the importance of reading. We understand that our children learn to read up until fourth grade, then they must read, and read well, to learn. Our system-wide literacy initiative is already a model for other school systems across our state.

Three schools, Pond Gap Elementary and Holston and Northwest Middle, implemented a performance pay plan for teachers known as the Teacher Advancement Plan or TAP.

The results from our first year are in and they are quite remarkable! Each school saw significant improvement, and goals were exceeded. This year we are taking the successful TAP model to Lonsdale Elementary.

I want to thank Athanasios Byantes, Kim Waller, Betty Crawford and the Knox County Education Association for making it happen!

I applaud the Board of Education. This year, they adopted a policy that accepts nothing less than 90% of our students receiving a regular diploma, 90% of those taking the ACT, and 90% of those scoring 21 or above. You are establishing lofty goals, but ones we are capable of achieving and exceeding.

We are increasing graduation rates, placing greater emphasis on math and science, and insisting on more real world relevancy in our classrooms.

A great example of this is going to be taking place this fall. Right here at Hardin Valley Academy—Knox County's first new high school in nearly three decades and soon to be the home of the Hardin Valley Hawks!

This Academy has the potential to house 2,100 students with more than 264,000 square feet of space. It is our first geothermal school with more than 34 miles of underground pipe. This green infrastructure leads to cost savings and energy efficiencies.

Hardin Valley is more than a high school. It is our first academy. This concept allows our students to maximize their strengths in academic areas of their choosing. Divided into four neighborhoods, students will focus on science, math, and engineering OR health science OR law, business, and public affairs OR liberal arts.

Principal, Sallee Reynolds, and her team are diligently working to ensure a seamless transition and to provide students with a quality education. Sallee, I appreciate you!

It has been a pleasure, over the past 18 months, to work with our school administration. Folks like Dr. Donna Wright and Bob Thomas have been great partners in moving our schools forward.

I have to tell you, I am particularly indebted to one fella who has really made my job much easier. Roy Mullins, you are genuine, honest, and most importantly you truly care about kids. Your leadership brought stability during times of transition. You met every challenge we threw your way! This community owes you a great deal of gratitude. I hope you will come forward and accept his small token of our appreciation.

Although it is difficult to imagine, Hardin Valley's first freshman class will soon be knocking on doors in search of their first job. We want those jobs to be in their home community, right here in East Tennessee.

Recently, we began a conversation about improving the quality of our workforce.

We have witnessed economic development strategies shift. In the past, it was important to locate near major transportation arteries: interstate highways, airports, or railways. Later, companies became more interested in free land, cash incentives, and tax abatements. While these remain important, a new dynamic has emerged.

In the future, jobs will chase the workforce. And regardless of our collective marketing efforts and great quality of life, soon new jobs will find new regions to call home if we cannot provide qualified workers.

Our recent Workforce and Education Summit drew more than 600 people. The dialogue was meaningful and relevant. It was the first step to achieving our goal—the country’s best workforce.

We should ask ourselves, “What is my role in this workforce challenge?”

Larson Jay of DoubleJay Creative answered our call for action. Following our Summit, Larson established an apprenticeship program. He understands the importance of real world experience and is giving our students the extra help they need to meet their career goals! Larson is with us this morning. Larson, you are setting a great example for others to follow. Thank you.

We are in the midst of tough economic times. Gas and food prices are up. The housing market is down. We are in a recession or perhaps worse.

As we prepared this year’s budget, it was both challenging and frustrating to make our rapidly increasing expenses match our gradually decreasing revenues.

This year I am proposing a budget of \$641 million—a \$12 million increase from last year.

The increase in funding will go to our schools. However, the General County budget will see a decrease from last year.

The school budget will increase from \$358 million to \$370 million. Additionally, we will fund \$3.8 million for the Great Schools Partnership.

When you consider all dollars spent on education over the past six years, we have increased education funding by \$90 million.

We are scaling back our capital plan. Lagging tax revenues require it.

However, this year we will complete the long-overdue Powell Middle School and the new Carter Senior Center. Just this week, we gained a great partner for our new Burlington Branch library when the University of Tennessee opened a learning center there.

My budget also allows us to open the new 173-acre park named after my friend and former County Executive Tommy Schumpert.

This budget provides funds for our Chamber Partnership and Innovation Valley as we continue to promote economic growth.

We must meet the needs of our law enforcement officers—those who protect our neighborhoods, our streets, and our children. This year, we will purchase 38 new patrol cars and will spend \$7 million to fully fund the Sheriff's Pension Plan. Sheriff Jones and our men and women in blue, I am grateful for your service to our community.

Because our employees have earned it, we are proposing a 2% raise with a step increase for eligible employees. While states and communities across our country are facing layoffs, in Knox County, our employees are not only keeping their jobs but also receiving a pay increase! I'm proud of them and the work they do.

We will do all this while keeping a AA bond rating. This budget does not reduce Knox County's General FUND balance. Our FUND balance remains larger than when I took office.

We are encouraging other elected officials to join my office in a six month hiring freeze. Our budget absolutely depends on your cooperation.

After six months, we need to add a new position. I believe the addition of an Inspector General will result in a stronger and more accountable government. I ask County Commission to work with our office to make this happen.

Family budgets are tight. Government budgets need to be tight as well. So

for the ninth consecutive year, we will not have a property tax increase in Knox County.

This does not mean we halt progress or stop moving forward. It simply means we find new ways to be effective and do our jobs a little differently.

Now is not the time to dwell on limited resources. It is the time to roll up our sleeves, pull together, and do our best to achieve common goals.

I have often spoken about my vision for a “Great American Community.”

In my mind, a “Great American Community” engages parents in their children’s academic success. Its students are inspired, motivated, and prepared. Its teachers are professional and energized. A “Great American Community” believes in education and works hard to make every school a great school.

In a “Great American Community,” municipal or county boundaries are meaningless to economic prosperity. Citizens embrace regionalism and innovative public-private partnerships. These communities are consistently creating new and better jobs.

A “Great American Community” focuses on results not rhetoric. It leverages shared resources to meet shared needs. It treasures air and water quality...it values parks and its greenways...and most importantly, it takes bold steps to protect them.

Outstanding senior centers, veterans’ services and programs aiding the needy are all found in a “Great American Community.”

A “Great American Community” engages its citizens in the policymaking process and will never allow negative attitudes to derail positive successes.

The nuts and bolts of this community are faith and family. The difference makers are quiet, everyday heroes who sacrifice to give their children a better life and stand beside one another in good times and bad. These are the type of folks that live in a “Great American Community.”

I believe Knox County is this “Great American Community.” Our challenge is to continue to focus on things that truly make an impact in people’s lives.

I started out with absolutely nothing and this community has blessed me richly in a lot of different ways. One of those ways is serving as Knox County Mayor. I took this office with a great sense of humility, a great deal of purpose, and a great amount of respect for our citizens. I look forward to another year of serving you and the community that has given me so much.

Thank you again for being here. May God continue to bless Knox County and may He always bless America.