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Tuesday, February 28, 2006

Officials say 'State of the City' is good in Rochester

By ADAM D. KRAUSS
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ROCHESTER — The state of the city is "well and still exciting," former City Manager Bob Steele told a group of city employees and business leaders this morning at the Greater Rochester Chamber of Commerce annual breakfast forum at the Governor's Inn.

Steele cited the current Wal-Mart expansion, opening of the Hannaford Supermarket and recent approval of the 325,000 square-foot Flatley Company shopping plaza near the Spaulding Turnpike's Exit 13 as reasons to be excited.

"These projects provide jobs and services essential to the sustainability of our community, but even more important, it demonstrates to the region and the overall market place that Rochester is becoming a destination and a desirable place to be," said Steele, introduced as a "quiet man" with tremendous leadership by Tom Moody, chairman of the Chamber's board of directors.

Mayor John Larochelle introduced the concept of "social capital" as he and City Manager John Scruton explore ways to get people involved in the community. Picking up on points made in Robert Putnam's groundbreaking book, "Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community," Larochelle used the energy source coal to illustrate what he called the "currency of community."

"Social capital is like the heat a pile of burning coal provides so that each piece of coal can burn," Larochelle said, at one point holding up a chunk of coal as he stood under bright lights. Using charts to demonstrate the decline in social capital since the turbulent 1960s, Larochelle urged people "to shut the TV off and go out and get a life" and add to the city.



City Manager John Scruton, left, gives a presentation on balancing social service costs and efficient management during the Rochester State of the City breakfast forum at the Governor's Inn this morning. Former City Manager Bob Steele, right, talks about growth in the city. (John Huff/ Democrat photo)

Explaining social capital as financial, natural resource, human and infrastructure assets, Larochelle said increased capital can improve the attitude, spirit and willingness of resident to engage in collective, civic activities.

Scruton, in his third week on the job, picked up on the theme, saying the important decisions Rochester has to make "about its own destiny" can come only with community participation. "Over the coming months and years, we need your input to help make important decisions about the services and spending," he said.

In light of the ongoing budget process, Scruton said the City Council and staff "need to reach some middle ground" when balancing spending and services. Using a fictitious married couple to illustrate his points, Scruton discouraged against extreme budgeting, like spending freezes. He also highlighted new technology that, of course, costs money up front, "but will save money in the long run and improve the quality of your life."

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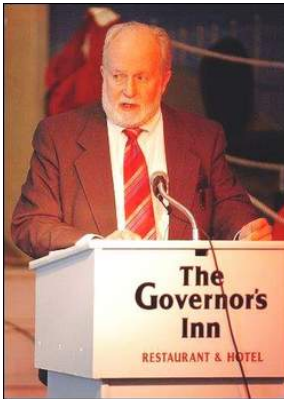
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ohn Huff/Democrat photo Former City Manager Bob Steele talks of the benefits Main Street programs have had on other communities and how Rochester could benefit as well during the Rochester State of the City breakfast event held at the Governor's Inn Monday morning.

Throughout his remarks, Scruton focused on long-term planning and community involvement. "It is important that citizens across the city become involved," he said. "The decisions on how to balance long-term spending, services and expenditures are an important aspect of the future of the city of Rochester."

Economic Development Manager Karen Pollard presented the "Top 10 Reasons to Celebrate Rochester," running down project highlights of the past year.

Laars Heating Systems Company's hiring of 55 people, Waste Management's local approval to expand its facility, the Hannaford opening, Wal-Mart expansion and Flatley plans rounded out the top five. Pollard gave the "honorable mention/Miss Congeniality" award to the downtown.

She also talked about the dozens of new business, including Thinking Machine and Thai Cuisine II.

Steele, who retires Friday, encouraged support for the Main Street Program, which the city will apply for this summer. He also stressed the need to pay "special attention" to maintaining, paving and reconstructing roads. He said Rochester is "entering a new era." He thanked the community for the support he received and opportunity "to serve you."

The breakfast was sponsored by Frisbie Memorial Hospital.