

Duke's Column for Northland Reader 27 Dec. 2001 Issue

As I figure it, the publisher has my column timed so I'll be reviewing the Mayor's State of the City address the next time I write. Just thinking about yet another State of the City from Gary Doty is enough to make my holidays bright. There is little I enjoy more than the annual recitation of the Mayor's accomplishments, as seen through the eyes of someone getting an hourly rate to enumerate them.

I haven't heard who is writing the Mayor's speech this year, but I have a few ideas to improve upon what's been offered in the past. My view of things is somewhat different than the view from the 4th floor of City Hall. After all these years, it might be time for a change of pace. Besides, the Chamber of Commerce leadership so self satisfied these days, they won't even be listening. While the Mayor is speaking, they'll be lining up for the back slapping, hand shaking and disingenuous comment segment of the evening.

I always winch at the opening of the Mayor's speeches. Not for reasons you might think, either. The Mayor isn't funny. That doesn't mean a few of us haven't occasionally had a good guffaw at his expense; it means he's not a funny person. He has no comic timing. I hope he doesn't open the speech with a joke. Even self-deprecating humor doesn't work; our mayor always gets mad at anyone who makes fun of him.

Every year, Gary Doty gives us the latest tally of jobs created the previous year. But that number is confusing when not balanced by the number of jobs lost during the previous year. This year, I'd like to have him take the number of new jobs and subtract from it the number of jobs lost. That number is really the number of new jobs. I think it would also be most informative to include the annual income comparisons between jobs lost and jobs gained. Just keeping the records clean would tell us a great deal about how we're doing.

When the speechwriter gets to the fill-in-the-blank part about what's wonderful about Duluth, I hope they list things that really are wonderful. The plans for commercial development at Bayfront Park aren't wonderful. The Great Lakes Aquarium is in trouble, and in spite of the mayor's best efforts the Spirit Ridge Golf Course is not a "done deal". It would be nice if this portion of the speech focused on actual assets of our city and not used as a battering ram to convince us we'll just love: (pick one)

A.) Picking up the tab for the Great Lakes Aquarium.

B.) Shopping for shoes at Bayfront Park.

C.) All the neat craft items that can be made from old growth trees.

Our unique old buildings, our hard working entrepreneurs, our parks, our lake shore, our arts community, our educational community, medical services and growing environmental industries all deserve recognition. It would be good if the Mayor indicted an appreciation for what matters most to most of us.

He's got to talk about the Economic Summit, he can't avoid it. Unlike crime and affordable housing, the Economic Summit got a lot of media coverage. There was an impressive turnout of interested folks from all over the region. Many have a strong interest in the future of the area. The Economic Summit was a good start.

However, unless the goal of the Economic Summit was to fill the DECC ballroom for a couple of mornings, the Mayor's speechwriter should avoid the urge to declare the Summit a smashing success. Any value from the Economic Summit won't be seen unless the Mayor sticks to the follow up he promised. As far as the Economic Summit goes, it's probably best to stick to an update on the work of the committee appointed to spearhead the ideas discussed during the Summit.

When outlining economic development plans and goals, it would be nice if the Mayor threw in words like "sustainable" and "environmentally sound". There's still time, before the speech, for someone to get the Mayor some information on just what these words mean. I'm convinced, once he figures it out; he's going to love the idea behind sustainable and environmentally sound development. If not, the State of the City Address, might be an ideal time for him to explain why sustainable environmentally sound economic development won't work for Duluth. I know there are many of us interested in his views on that topic.

Finally, when the Technology Village comes up, as it will, I hope the Mayor will be fair. We taxpayers didn't contribute to that project based upon filling a new building. The amount of space the building owner has rented is of no importance to us. What we need to know is how many new jobs have been created as a result of our investment. I hope the mayor will talk about jobs; not tenants. I'm sure the Children's Playhouse will be a great addition to the mix of relocated Duluth businesses, but it's not what we built a parking ramp to attract.

I'm not idealistic enough to think for one minute that the Mayor will heed even one of my well-meant suggestions. For all I know, his speechwriter won't even read this column. But that's okay. It's enough for me to know, that like it or not, on January 7th, we'll have a rare moment in city government: the Mayor will attend a council meeting, and for a change someone besides Councilor Hogg will do all the talking.