

State of the City Address

Mayor Ken Miyagishima

February 18, 2015

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

First of all, welcome. Bienvenidos and a heart-felt thanks to my colleagues on the city council, to members of our city staff, and to all our fellow citizens who are in attendance today or watching at home. I especially want to welcome and thank my wife and first lady, Rosie Miyagishima, for your love, support and inspiration. It's a special pleasure for me to introduce my parents, Mike and Catalina Miyagishima, my brother James, and my father- and mother-in-law, Ruben and Hortencia Reza. Although my children are not here with me today, I want to wish my daughter, Danielle, a happy belated birthday!

I am pleased to report today that the state of our city is strong.

A key element of that strength continues to be our careful fiscal stewardship. The city ended the last fiscal year with over seven million dollars in savings, and we continue to maintain our reserve account at twice the level required by law.

This financial record is a credit to the management skills of City Manager Robert Garza, Assistant City Managers Brian Denmark and Mark Winston, and our excellent city staff. Each year Robert leads the council and department heads through an intensive review and approval process for the budget, which is in turn based on a detailed strategic plan. This careful management of resources makes everything else we do in the city possible, including a long list of major improvements currently underway.

This year we will, in cooperation with the county, finish the Mesilla Valley Regional Dispatch Authority 911 Center. We are moving toward the construction phase of our new East Mesa Public Safety

Campus near the corner of Lohman and Sonoma Ranch Boulevard, which will include adjacent space for park and recreational facilities.

We will be nearing completion, by this time next year, of our long-awaited Civic Plaza, a site that will anchor our city and provide outdoor space for Las Cruces to gather. We look forward to having La Clinica de la Familia open its new facility in the former City Office Building and hope to finalize the sale of the old City Hall to the federal government for an office complex. It's great to see people strolling on Main Street, as they visit our museums, restaurants and shops.

We are also moving forward, in cooperation with NMSU, with plans for a new hotel adjacent to the City Convention Center, which will dramatically increase the number of people coming here to enjoy our hotels and tourist facilities. Another attraction will be the new Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument, which is expected to boost the local economy by over \$7 million dollars a year. Our beautiful landscape, open spaces and public lands continue to be strong economic assets for our city and region.

Wherever we look there are new opportunities for our residents and new enthusiasm for the future. Ground was recently broken for the new School of Osteopathy on the NMSU campus, and we welcome Franco Whole Foods to its new facility just west of downtown. This is a project that Councilor Small worked especially hard on, and one that will bring 150 new jobs and a strong new partner for our local community.

Las Cruces is a city on the move, and the envy of other municipalities across the state.

These many achievements, and the enthusiasm for our city that makes them possible, might not be apparent to the regular reader of Sound Off, or to those who mistook the passion of debate over the recent minimum wage question for uncertainty about our commitment to moving forward together. I don't see it that way. The recent minimum wage deliberations are a reflection of our city's strength, especially in our willingness to think about our community as a whole,

and how we can build an economy that works for everyone. In that respect, we are in the forefront of a discussion that is certain to occupy our nation as a whole in coming years.

While our own wage discussion is still fresh in our minds, I would like to reflect for a moment on what we learned from it, and how we might build on that experience in charting our future.

One of the first challenges on the minimum wage initiative was negotiating the process itself. The petitions turned in by CAFé represented the first time we had occasion to utilize the initiative process outlined in the City Charter. A great deal of time and effort went into deciding technical questions, ranging from when a vote on the initiative would be held to the language on the ballot.

As it turned out, a majority of the City Council decided to adopt the initiative with a plan of making changes before the initiative became law. And that is what a separate council majority voted to do a couple of months later, producing the minimum wage ordinance currently in effect for the City.

One takeaway from this whole experience, in my view, is that the Council needs, in the future, to more faithfully follow the procedure outlined in the City Charter. The Charter clearly states that the Council will either adopt the proposed ordinance “without any change in substance” or send it to the voters. Whatever the narrow legality of officially adopting the ordinance and then changing it a short time later, this action was not consistent with the spirit of the charter. In the future we need to either change the charter itself, in respect to initiatives, or do what it says. This means we should either accept the initiative as proposed, with only minor changes agreed to by the measure’s sponsor, or send it to the public for a vote.

Again, it was our first time through the process. In the future we will be better prepared in terms of understanding the options that we have.

Beyond the process question, there are the deeper issues that the wage discussion brought to our attention, that I'd also like to consider today.

First, let me describe my personal journey on this question.

Like many of you, I came to the question of raising the minimum wage for Las Cruces workers with mixed feelings.

On the one hand, I grew up in a loving but relatively low income family, and I scrambled to make my way. In 1979, I got my first job at Taco Bell, making \$2.90 an hour, which was minimum wage at the time. I was a hard worker, but money was tight, and I did without a lot that other kids had.

After college, I started my own business, and I've been in business all my life. I came to see the kind of struggle I faced during the early years of my work life as a valuable experience, teaching me that hard work and discipline would eventually pay off.

A few months ago, though, when I was working with my 16-year-old son on budgeting money from his job, I realized how much times have changed. The \$2.90 an hour that I earned in 1979 at Taco Bell would be worth over \$10 an hour now. I realized that I was earning, in those beginning years, a wage much higher, in real terms, than what minimum wage workers earn today. I began to realize that some of us may need to update our view on what a dollar is worth in 2015, especially since the costs of so many things, like higher education, have increased much more rapidly than the cost of living as a whole.

Other things have not changed. Young people need to earn enough to get launched in life, and to learn, as we did, that hard work leads to freedom and opportunity. It's important that they get the experience and training to move ahead economically, of course, and many do. Meanwhile many other workers of all ages are still clustered near the bottom of the pay scale, without much chance of that changing.

And these are people important to us – they take care of our children while we’re working; bathe and feed our elders when their health fails; build our homes, clean our motel rooms and serve our meals. What they do is crucial to our community and daily lives.

I know my fellow business owners share this understanding. Our employees are not just key partners in our economic success, they are our friends and neighbors. We want them to earn enough that they can have real options and opportunity, spend time with their families and support their children’s education, and be fully involved in the life of our community.

That’s why I am suggesting today that the council endeavor to honor, however imperfectly it was arrived at, the minimum wage ordinance that we passed in early December. Delaying the next wage increases to 2017 and 2019, as the ordinance provides, will give businesses time to adjust, and give workers a way in to the larger economy, with the same effective minimum wage that so many of us enjoyed ourselves when we entered the workforce.

The current ordinance includes a review every July, which we will certainly engage in, but I’m guessing that outcomes will still be unclear. If that’s the case, then I hope we will stay the course with what we agreed on, giving predictability to businesses and employees alike. That way we can look one another in the eye, as we move through our days, and know that a fair wage for a fair day’s work is in place in Las Cruces -- one more reason to be proud of the city where we live.

I’d like to share one final thought about from the minimum wage discussion. I believe we’re a better community for having taken this on. I see CAFé and others who joined in the initiative playing an important role in our community, as they call on us to examine what might otherwise be ignored. We may struggle to find effective solutions, but we’re better people and a better city for having had these questions raised.

I have new appreciation for my fellow business owners as well. I share their perspective that workforce training and a steadily improving economy are essential to improving wages. I appreciate that, after the issue was first raised, they supported the council's initial wage ordinance, an ordinance that raised the wage to almost a dollar above the current state minimum. I know that they care about their employees and want the best for them in their lives.

In any case, I don't think CAFé is going anywhere. I expect they will continue to remind us of our many responsibilities to the people of our community, serving as a kind of Chamber of Commerce for those who would be otherwise be unheard. I also know that business owners, whatever the headwinds and frustration, will continue to build and buy and sell, to employ and serve, carrying out activities that have been at the center of human society since the beginning of time.

With that in mind, I have a few gifts that I'd like to give out. Maybe some of you have seen these T shirts that Richard Parra, the owner of Spirit Winds, designed. As you can see, there's a map of the state of New Mexico, with a Zia sign for Las Cruces and the label of Home.

I'd like Sarah Nolan and Cassie Calway of CAFé to come up, along with business leaders Marci Dickerson of The Game and Dickerson Catering, and Oscar Andrade, the owner of our local PicQuiks. I'm giving you these shirts as a way of thanking you for all that you do for our city. I hope they will serve as a reminder that – whatever our disagreements from time to time – we're in this together. What we're trying to do together is build a better community, and Las Cruces is the home that we share.

Thank you again for your service to our community, and for your patience with those of us in public service as we strive to get it right.

I started today by reporting that the state of the city is strong. I have made clear our belief that this strength depends on good financial stewardship. I've mentioned just a few of the many exciting initiatives underway. I have also suggested that we become stronger as we

negotiate challenging questions about who we are as a community, and as we figure out together the best way to proceed.

The final area I would like to touch on today combines all of these elements, and is rooted in what we think of as our purpose as a city.

At its most basic level, the purpose of city government is the public good. Specifically, it is to use our shared resources to do together what we can't do alone: building and maintaining streets, providing water and sewage systems, and creating a sphere of public safety through our police, fire and emergency services. Inevitably, as a city grows, we aspire to those things that contribute to quality of life, like libraries and playgrounds, senior centers and recreational programs, ball fields, swimming pools and parks.

It's important that we understand that these are not just products we consume, but part of something that we build together, the large and complex creation of public life. And that public life, in turn, provides a platform for our private lives, the setting in which each of us seeks meaning and fulfillment, in all the different ways that we choose.

It's an odd and hopeful enterprise, this democratic process of building a city. We may never use some of the services that the city offers. Benefits may go to people we've never met. And yet we continue to work together, investing our time, talents and resources, creating a better life not just for ourselves but for everyone else.

I hope we will continue to make the investments necessary – contributing our tax dollars, our energy and creativity, our attention and our votes – to make this a great place to live. I am confident that we will, especially since that commitment is so much in evidence in our community today.

That's why I'm so excited by the projects that I outlined at the start of my talk today. I can hardly wait until the civic plaza is finished, and we hear the shouts of children at play in the water feature, as the sound of laughter spreads through the streets of downtown. I'm looking forward to the new clinic and federal offices, and eager to see people

move into the new loft apartments behind the Sun-News building. I'm already looking forward to going downtown to watch the Chile fall at midnight next December 31st.

I'm also excited by the new facilities that are still in the planning stages, like a first class swimming facility, suitable for our own use and regional competitions. I want to make sure we have great sports and recreation facilities for our young people and active adults. I'm excited by the new park behind the retention dam, a 700-acre natural area for all of us to enjoy. It's great, too, to see people out at all hours on the walking and bike trails that increasingly connect us in the city.

We are already working more closely with the county, but I'm eager to work more closely with the Las Cruces Public Schools as well. I want to take a moment and thank Dr. Bonnie Votaw and Dr. Connie Phillips for their service to the public these past 8 years. I'm also pleased to welcome our two new school board members, Maury Castro and Edward Frank. I ask you to pass along our continuing interest in partnering with the school district to make local schools true centers of their neighborhoods, with after-school and recreation programs that the city could sponsor. We can do great things when we work together – all we need is a willingness to invest in ourselves and the future of our community.

I've talked a lot today about that willingness to invest. I would like to finish by reflecting on the bargain that investment entails. And that is the expectation that the resources we contribute will be wisely and efficiently utilized, and the institution we create together – city government -- will be effective, transparent and fair.

This is perhaps the most important commitment that we make to ourselves. It's also one in which I believe we have made important progress. First, I want to recognize our city council. Whatever disagreements we've had, I know that all of you have acted conscientiously and in good faith, representing to the best of your abilities the people of our city. City Manager Garza, our assistant city managers and our entire staff are exemplary civil servants,

developing and presenting our options with clarity, and effectively carrying out the policies we enact.

Important to this process has been our commitment to the strategic plan that aligns the priorities of council and staff, laying out publicly and in detail what we intend to accomplish over a given period. Progress toward each goal is monitored carefully, and summarized at regular intervals. There are copies in the back of the room of the 2014 Strategic Plan, which includes results from the previous two-year plan from 2012-2013. I will hope you will take one and look it over. I think you will be impressed by all that has been accomplished, and that you will appreciate the accountability this effort entails.

Second, there's the importance of responsiveness to the people of the city. Some of you may remember last year's State of the City address, when I expressed the hope that our customer service would eventually be as good as for a five star hotel. I'm happy to report that we're well on our way. I hope you will visit the new city web site. The first thing you'll see there is a link to our Citizen Contact Center, with its own links to the people and departments who can respond to every conceivable need or concern related to they city. There are phone numbers to reach customer service representatives as well, and if you're still not satisfied, you'll find contact information for Jamey Rickman – can you raise your hand Jamey? – our hard-working Community Liaison, whose job is to find the people and answers you need.

Finally, we are committed to careful planning as a city and region, including as partners in the Viva Doña Ana Initiative and the comprehensive planning process that is currently underway. By developing and committing ourselves to good comprehensive planning, we can be much more thoughtful and efficient in the extension of our streets, water and other city services. This not only gives important predictability to the development community, it helps all of us preserve the things we most prize in our community and its surroundings.

Through all that we've discussed today – our commitment to financial stability and efficient use of resources, the many fruits of that stewardship we see around the city, our appreciation of a variety of perspectives as we work together, a glimpse of some of the many opportunities that still lie ahead – I hope you share my assessment of the work that we've done.

So I am pleased to report once more that the state of the city is strong, and that we are poised to make important steps forward in coming months and years.

Thank you for your faith in me and in one another. Thank you for the opportunity to be your mayor. Let's look forward with resolve and excitement to the days that lie ahead, and to an ever-brighter future for this special place we call home.

Thank you.