

Script : Presentation by
The City of Akron to Judges of the National Civic League
Tampa, Florida
June 5, 2008

DAVE LIEBERTH:

Good afternoon, Judges.

My name is Dave Lieberth. I chaired the community conversation *Imagine.Akron: 2025*, which engaged a thousand of our residents in shaping our city's vision of the future.

Today, we've brought 66 people to Tampa to tell you how we are achieving that vision. They represent our city council, our business community, our non-profit institutions, our health care system, and our neighborhoods, and they know they have a voice in creating Akron's future.

Our Mayor for the last 22 years has been Don Plusquellic.

MAYOR PLUSQUELLIC: Judges, I like to tell other mayors around the country the truth: Akron is the most collaborative community in the United States. In a city of almost 220,000, the people who live in our 22 different neighborhoods still feel they live in a small town.

Akron was a dominant player in the rubber and tire industry during the last century. In the 1970's, 30-thousand manufacturing jobs disappeared.

Today, we are a global center for Materials Science, Advanced Manufacturing, and Biomedical Engineering.

Over the last 20 years, Akron has been transformed because of our resilience as a community and because of the people on this stage and the residents of our city they represent.

DAVE LIEBERTH: Akron’s resilience had to be matched by resourcefulness. When Akron didn’t have jobs in 1983 — we had to invent them.

Last month in San Antonio, Akron’s Industrial Incubator was recognized with the National Incubation Innovation Award. (PROP)

Since its founding, the director of the Akron Industrial Incubator has been Mike LeHere.

MIKE LeHERE: Judges, we opened Ohio’s first Industrial Incubator in 1983.

We have graduated 65 companies who now employ over 750 people, and we currently house 39 companies who are at the leading edge of their technologies.

We TOO have graduated. Our incubator is now called the Akron Global Business Accelerator.

Two years ago, Mayor Plusquellic led a mission to Israel with broad representation from business, our hospitals, and from our Jewish community. We have invested in an Israeli incubator who will send us companies with well-developed ideas who need American manufacturing know-how to “accelerate” their inventions.

One of our current companies was founded by entrepreneur Russ Breeding, who watched the Sago mine disaster on TV two years ago, and was moved by the futile search for 13 miners underground.

He’s been on submarines in the Navy, and wondered why the same navigation electronics that tracked subs under water wouldn’t work for miners.

So Russ developed a device to track movement of people and machines underground. This year, his InSeT Systems was among the top-10 inventions of 2008, as published by Popular Science Magazine.

Our strongest community links are with the professors and students of the University of Akron. Dr. Sebastian Kanakkanatt is a chemist who has created polymers that change color. Here's one of his flameless polymer candles. And soon, Fisher-Price will use his advanced photochromic ink invention in a light-sketcher for kids.

DAVE LIEBERTH: Success for Akron means capitalizing on our innovations. One Akron innovation was how to come up with our local match for nearly \$800 million that will be spent over 12 years to re-build every Akron school. The State of Ohio is using funds from its tobacco settlement to pay sixty percent of the cost to re-build Ohio schools. Akron is the only Ohio city paying for new schools with an increase in the city income tax, and approved by voters in a year when the Mayor and 10 councilmen were up for election.

David James is overseeing the re-construction of every school building in the city and in another month will become Akron's new superintendent of schools.

DAVID JAMES: Judges, it was the Mayor who came up with the idea to use the city income tax, and discovered that it was lawful, ONLY if we constructed a jointly-owned building - a Community Learning Center: used by the schools, and shared by the community after 3pm on school days, on weekends, and in the summers. The Community Learning Centers are operated as a partnership between the school board and the City.

We called our planning process, "Imagine Akron Public Schools."

For each of 47 new buildings, we invite teachers, parents, and residents to meet with us, to understand what THEY wanted in a new building.

We then asked our designers to come up with a sketch of what it might look like.

We take it back to the neighborhood two more times before the design goes to our Joint Board and the school board.

Every building reflects this comprehensive citizen-involvement. The meetings are well-attended, boisterous at times, and everyone has their say. And even where people start-out with strong views about what's important to THEM — the process has proved that when the children's interests are put first, neighbors, parents, and teachers DO work together.

As of today, we have opened 10 buildings. 17 more are underway, and an additional twenty buildings will be finished before 2016.

It's great to walk into a new building, and see the teachers smile. The kids are happy with their new spaces, too. And something has surprised me - - Our ten new Community Learning Centers are graffiti-free and vandalism free. The neighborhoods OWN these new buildings, and they are proud of them.

DAVE LIEBERTH: No where is that more apparent than in one area of South Akron. 40 years ago this summer – it was the scene of violence, burning and looting, scenes witnessed across the country. Eventually, the only elementary school in the neighborhood was closed.

But Akron City Council President Marco Sommerville worked to have dilapidated housing demolished. 155 new homes built in their place.

A new athletic field and branch library were built.

The Akron Zoo is staying in this neighborhood. With its new tax levy it has invested \$ 19 million in new visitor attractions.

Our Public Housing Authority is building 172 modern units as part of an \$80 million development.

Our Regional Foodbank re-located here to better serve 8 Ohio counties.

And 39 years after the riots in this neighborhood, Akron's first Community Learning Center was opened here. But it was not alone.

Bernett Williams is the President and CEO of the Akron Urban League.

BERNETT WILLIAMS: Judges, for over 83 years, the Akron Urban League has been a voice for African Americans - - who make up about a third of the city's population.

Our old building had seen better days. We could not afford to operate it.

The Mayor and Council President urged us to enter into a partnership with Akron Public Schools to build our new urban league headquarters as part of the new school building.

We raised \$ 5 million with over 150 members of the community participating.

The new facility has new offices, a meeting hall, a day care, and a workforce development center, attached to the new Helen Arnold Community Learning Center.

We used the same architects.

There is a common hallway that connects our buildings.

Helen Arnold will hold its graduation in our hall and we will use their classrooms this summer for the 118 kids in our summer camp.

Our Young Professionals group will teach financial literacy to their kids.

Attendance is up for our GED classes, and more people are taking computer training.

We've linked over 16-hundred people with employment opportunities.

And as CEO, I can tell you that it's great to see our utility and operating costs down.

On the day of our Grand Opening last August, I was disappointed when the heavens opened-up and rained poured down - but Judges - Over two thousand people walked through that rain that day to help us celebrate these buildings.

They are so proud of what we have done. We have transformed this neighborhood.

DAVE LIEBERTH: Our resilience and resourcefulness have restored Akron's confidence.

Tyrell Butts and Devonte Roper will be entering 9th grade at Buchtel High School this Fall after three years at Perkins Middle School where they were involved in Perkins Activities Central, headed by Carla Sibley of the Akron Public Schools.

CARLA SIBLEY: Judges, We keep kids safe. We help working families, and we inspire learning.

Tyrell and Devonte entered our program in the summer after 5th grade. They have benefited from Alchemy, a program headed by Kwame Scruggs. This is one of eighteen programs with whom we partner in our after school program at Perkins.

Kwame's mission has been to engage African American boys at a time when they are poised to take advantage of the best that school has to offer. Unfortunately, 80% of our young men at Perkins have no father at home.

In Alchemy, these young men bond to Kwame, to other men, and to each other. There is a real sense of fraternity and belonging that will serve them well as they enter high school.

Perkins Activities Central is more than a way to keep kids busy after school, All of our partner programs MUST incorporate academics into their

activities. The Knight Foundation's investment requires a rigorous evaluation of success.

And, Akron's elementary after-school program is nationally recognized for improving student achievement.

Devonte and Tyrell are not finished with us, nor are they finished with Alchemy. As they enter high school, they will continue to work with Kwame on Saturdays and become mentors to the 5th graders entering Perkins Middle School.

MAYOR PLUSQUELLIC. Judges, Akron has had to re-invent itself.

The significant challenges we have faced have been met by the ingenuity of our people and the active participation by thousands of Akron community residents, from business, our non-profits, our governments, and our neighborhoods. We find strength in our diversity. The active engagement of our young people gives us hope for the future. Thank you.