2004 was an incredible year for the City of Conway in many ways. In city government, great things were achieved in many departments which brought better city services to citizens across the city. The following is a quick, but extensive list of accomplishments this past year.

* The opening of Amity Road completed a critically needed through access between Hwy. 64 and Hwy. 286 east of the Interstate. This project’s development and completion was a critical key in the development of the Conway Commons shopping center.

* The opening of new off-ramp for the railroad overpass at Dave Ward Drive makes ingress and egress to IC Corp., Baldwin Piano, and Virco as well as all other industrial sites along Sturgis Road much safer and easier. The new Technology Park will also benefit from this new street construction.

* The completion of Tyler-Donaghey Railroad crossing upgrade simplifies and smoothes the flow of east and west bound traffic on Tyler. This completes the first of three projects on the Tyler corridor which will make this critical east-west arterial more efficient at moving traffic. The next two projects will include redesigning the intersection of Tyler, Washington, & Winfield and the installation of a traffic light at Winfield and Harkrider.

* Completion of the most extensive Street Overlay program in the city’s history places new asphalt through all city wards. Over $600,000 in street overlay projects were undertaken this last year.

* Collection of Impact Fee moneys started and the city still issued its third highest number of single family housing permits ever. 2004 proved that impact fees do not effect growth; the quality of the product drives growth. Conway is still the only city in Arkansas with a street impact fee in place.

* The Conway Loop route was selected and the consultants start work on the Final Environmental Impact Statement. Long years of effort have culminated in a line on the ground just awaiting approval and acceptance by the proper authorities. Just the first phases of the Loop project will help provide the access to the interstate system for today’s citizens that the existing exits allowed for Conway’s 10,000 citizens of the 1960’s.

* The Silver Moon Cinema debuted classic and popular movies to large and excited crowds in the downtown streets during both its spring and fall seasons. This
outdoor cinema project is run by volunteers as a program of the Parks & Recreation Department. It was funded through a joint effort of the Conway Advertising & Promotion Commission, the Downtown Partnership, and the city.

* The First State Soccer Complex opened to rave reviews through a public/private partnership that saw Johnny Allison and First State Bank purchase the land and construct the fields, Conway United Soccer Association agree to maintain the park, and the city build the road and supply water and sewer.

* Downtown is the recipient of another $620,000 in federal infrastructure funding to go with the $270,000 in funding authorized the previous year. These federal funds are over and above the local monies that have recently been spent on streetscape improvements downtown.

* Parkway Street streetscape downtown was refurbished to match the Front Street work done last year. The work which includes lighting, sidewalks, planters and landscaping was conducted in partnership with the Downtown Partnership, Conway Corporation, and the city.

* The numerous large drainage ditches across the city were cleaned and shaped in the first major improvement of the city’s storm drainage system in many years.

* The Historic District ordinance was passed adopting building standards and procedures for the Robinson Historic District and granting the Conway Historic District Commission authority over the district regulations. This brings the city into compliance with federal regulations which then allow the city to be the further recipient of grants for historic preservation. More importantly, it allows the city to begin the proper protection and preservation of those areas and structures that are unique and, therefore, historic to Conway, Arkansas.

* The Comprehensive Land Use Plan was updated for the first time since 1996. This critical document outlines a rough sketch of what land uses would be located in the developing areas of our city.

* Conway Commons opened yet more stores with Target, Home Depot, and Pier 1 leading the wave of retail expansion in Conway resulting in an increase of 10% in sales tax collections. Sales tax collections for the city’s one cent tax for general operations rose from almost $7.8 million to more than $8.7 million proving the Chamber’s “Conway First” program is becoming reality.

* The Conway Emergency Operational Center (CEOC) opened placing city and county dispatchers in the same room for the first time. A $2.3 million Federal Homeland Security grant provided updated digital communication equipment allowing near seamless interoperability between multiple agencies in a time of disaster. While the much criticized at the time and since, the city council’s 2000 decision to construct the Center’s building shell and electronic infrastructure
providing a turn key structure ready for funding was critical to the Federal Government’s choice of Conway as its model EOC project.

* City police dispatchers were increased three personnel and were relocated from the lobby of the Central Police Station to the new CEOC. This move allows dispatchers to handle critical police dispatch without the requiring assistance of untrained, called-in police officers. It further means that dispatchers do not have to handle such distractions such as walk-ins at the police department due to their former conspicuous location in the police lobby. (Council actions in 2005 have already added three additional personnel to dispatch giving the city three 24-hour hot seats and, for the first time, dedicating one of seats exclusively to fire dispatch.)

* Two Fire Department Bomb Disposal Teams were trained, supplied, and activated through a Federal Homeland Security grant. These two member teams have already been called out on over fifteen incidents within the City of Conway and without. The federal funding requires these teams to be available for call out to other jurisdictions and as such the selection of the Conway Fire Department to host such a team should be considered a testament to the professionalism of the department.

* A Fire Department Hazardous Materials (Haz Mat) Decontamination Team was commissioned, trained, and outfitted through a Federal Homeland Security grant. Again, the federal funding requires that this team also be available for call out to other jurisdictions and is a testament to the professionalism of the Conway Fire Department for their selection to host such a team.

* Theodore Jones Elementary School, finally after more than ten years, was accessed by a new road built with the leadership of Terry Fiddler, School Board President and funded through a partnership between Conway Public School District, Greg Wren and partners, and the city.

* Street Impact Fee monies were designated for use on five roads in the initial phase of the Street Capital Program. The streets included are Wescon Lane, Padgett Road, Favre Lane, Siebenmorgen Road, and Tyler Street. Without impact fees, these roads leading primarily to and from Conway Public schools would, in the foreseeable future, yet be safety problems for our public. Work actually started on Wescon Lane in the late summer of 2004 with completion expected 2005.

* Park Impact Fee collections approached $200,000 and will allow the match of a State of Arkansas parks grant of $100,000 for upgrading existing park playgrounds in the city. This is money that would have otherwise been required of the General Fund.

* A Fleet Maintenance program was established under the umbrella of the Sanitation Department to service city vehicles saving substantial time and money.
It is estimated during a five month period that the Police Department saved approximately $35,000. All non-specialty city vehicles have been brought into this program.

* In the wake of the Detco fire, a new simplified Emergency Operations Plan was established for the city. The East Oakwood Place fire proved we had learned some things but other lessons were yet to be learned. Nonetheless, we are most definitely better prepared today than last year for a community disaster. In both these situations, the long experience and expertise of our Fire Chief and his command staff plus the dedication and selflessness of firefighters and police officers alike showed themselves to be irreplaceable assets in time of need.

* The Finance Department won its first ever Distinguished Budget Presentation Award from the Government Finance Officers Association.

* The city’s audit, handled by an independent auditing firm, was perfectly clean for the second year in a row both in regards to compliance with state law AND to the fair reporting of the city’s financial position according to generally accepted accounting principles. The city has successfully completed the migration from a government conducted compliance audit to an independent auditing firm’s full business audit. Your city’s finances are in proper order and any CPA in the world could testify to that fact.

* Scales were installed at Sanitation to become compliant with ADEQ regulations.

* Curb side recycling was expanded nearly citywide.

* A low cost spay & neuter system was established at Conway Animal Welfare Unit funded by the animal license fees taken in by the city. A voucher system was created which gives a $60 credit for dogs and a $40 credit for cats on required spay & neuters operations. Hopefully, this will encourage more adoptions from the shelter and reduce the high percentage of animals that must be put down.

* The Parks & Recreation Advisory Board completed its study and submitted its report on the state of the Conway Parks Department, its programs, its facilities, and its needs. It further made recommendations as to priorities and funding of these needs. The city hopes to use this report when shaping the next phase of Parks & Recreation improvements as money comes available.

* Metropolitan Emergency Medical Service (MEMS) was awarded the city’s franchise for the ambulance service. MEMS brings an extremely professional and extremely well equipped organization into the Conway area. MEMS, which provides most of the ambulance service across the Little Rock metro area, provides an advanced life support emergency medical service. To date, the service has consistently met the service requirements of the franchise and has received many kudos for the level of professional service provided. Furthermore,
in the event of a major catastrophe, MEMS simplifies interagency cooperation as it can draw on region wide resources for proper response.

* Conway has the third lowest sales tax rate of the largest ten cities in the state and the two cities ahead of us are not substantially growing in population if at all. The City’s sales tax rate is at least three quarters of a cent lower than other cities growing like Conway is. Yet, Conway is still one of the premier cities of opportunity in the state. If our citizens want lower taxes, then by all means we’ll brag about it. Conway’s sales tax rate of 8.25% is three quarters of a cent less than Cabot and Jacksonville, Rogers and Bentonville (9.0%); a full cent less than Fayetteville and Fort Smith (9.25%), and 1 ¼ less than Springdale (9.5%). Considering we still have a great quality of life and our citizens do not want more taxes, that is something to brag about.

**THIS GLASS IS HALF FULL**

This last point made above is not a facetious point. Although it may sound odd coming from the man who has greatly pushed for sales tax increases, in the end we must be content with the wishes of our citizens. It is no idle words which state “the People Rule.” Three times the citizens have voted no for more taxes to supply more funds for primarily street and drainage work - two of those times have been for exclusively street and drainage work. We can look at this issue two ways: the glass is half full or half empty. We have looked at it half empty for too long. The condemnation implicit in the denial of these sales tax increases may not be wholly or fairly against the city government but may simply be a condemnation of higher taxes.

There is a “black dog of negativity” which seems to hunker around city circles these days which serves no useful purpose. Yes, there are always disagreements inherent in representative government. Yes, projects are undertaken and money spent on certain matters or not that incur the wrath of some part of the electorate. Through good times and bad these disagreements are always present and are always nettlesome. But they do not mean that trust should not be given to our local government. Even if you include the sales tax defeats, it is not necessarily an indictment of that local government and the job they are doing. The black dog only stays around if you feed it. I will no longer feed it.

The above list I offer to you as testament that your local government is doing its job making Conway a better place. That list includes some impressive, progressive achievements of which the citizens of Conway should be proud.

Yes, there are yet many needs the city has. Just at the end of this last year, the Mayor’s Office released a study of future revenues, expenditures, and capital needs. In it, some $60 million in unfunded capital needs were identified for the next ten years alone. These are predictable needs that the city must find a way to fund.

The workhorse for cities around the state in recent years for raising large amounts of money has been the sales tax. However, since I became Mayor in January 1999, the
total sales tax rate in Conway has increased from 6.125% to 8.25%. While the city was able to raise its rate a quarter cent for employee salaries, most of the remaining one and seven-eighth’s cent increase has been imposed upon us by the state. Given the steep rise in the sales tax rate, we should not be disheartened by the reluctance of Conway citizens to raise the rate even further.

The city must nonetheless fund its needs. Given the current overuse of the sales tax, the city must find other revenue sources to overcome the revenue shortfalls and meet the needs of our future. *In Conway, new general sales taxes are not the answer.* New alternative and even specialized sources of revenue must be explored and prudent uses of old resources are necessary to achieve this, but I believe it can be done.

Even in light of all Conway might want and must need, an impressive list of accomplishments was achieved in 2004 of which the citizens can be proud. Though we have our needs and shortfalls, this glass is definitely HALF FULL and we’re looking for more to come.

**A SPECIAL OPPORTUNITY**

In 1990 the official census found there to be approximately 26,000 people in Conway. Estimates, from late 2004, show Conway to be over 50,000 and possibly having as many as 53,000 people in residence. If this is true, the city will have doubled in size in the last fifteen years. It took over one hundred and fifteen years for Conway to get to 26,000 and only fifteen to double it. The question growth places directly before city leadership is this: “We are quickly building the city we are to become forever. Are we building the city we want to be?”

As has been the case for some years, Conway is developing into the second largest city in the Little Rock Metro area. Conway’s population will catch North Little Rock’s either by the next regular census or shortly thereafter. While NLR will foreseeably have a greater urban structure in its city design from sharing a waterfront and urban center with Little Rock, Conway will become the larger population base.

Further, Conway has the most “stand alone” economy in the metro area outside of the City of Little Rock. While Lonoke, Saline, and Perry counties ship approximately sixty percent (60%) of their resident workforce to Pulaski County every work day, only thirty-two percent of Faulkner County’s resident workforce commute to Pulaski County. Even though that percentage is on the rise, it is still proof of Conway’s significantly independent economy.

Culturally, though, Conway is inexplicably tied to the core metro area. Between the shopping, the dining, the entertainment options, the attractions, Conway residents stream into the core metro area in the evenings and weekends. Without the presence of the old “Twin Cities” to our south, the City of Conway’s quality of life and its prospects for the future would pale dramatically. In essence, we are Little Rock! Indeed, any industrial prospect already perceives us in such a fashion and the new residents coming
into the Central Arkansas area already shop for their homes in such a fashion. It is the manifestation of Little Rock’s motto writ large – Conway is part of Little Rock’s “City Limitless!”

But from the nearby small town of yesteryear, Conway is emerging as something more. Certainly, the growing presence of regional shopping in Conway has already warped the routes of many in and around the metro area on their shopping errands. While some shoppers notice the changing sales tax rates as they navigate the metro area, they don’t notice the zip code or the city limits. For many years commercially and economically, the demographics of Conway have helped attract stores and employers to the Little Rock area; Conway’s demographics and particular location on the rim and on a critical artery of the metro area will now start working for its economy more directly. As McCain Mall signalized a shift in commercial activity over thirty years ago, so too has Conway’s move to becoming a regional commercial presence. Conway, unlike other older core cities, has many stand alone qualities that were once necessitated by that seemingly long drive of years past. Today those stand alone qualities greatly add character to a bustling city now just a short drive away. With growth changes, however, come changes in community character.

As the soon to be second largest city in the metro area; as the second city with the most distinct economy, as the city which includes among its demographics some of the most highly educated and the youngest populations, as the city with a commanding educational presence, what are we becoming other than just larger? Yes, Conway has benefited from its location next to Little Rock. But is there yet a role Conway could play to the benefit the Little Rock metro area?

Absolutely! As a growing population and retail center, Conway could provide that “off core” area that Little Rock needs to compare more favorably with other metro areas – metro areas to which we are already being compared. With higher standards of community development and design, with quality of LIFESTYLE changes that allows quick weekday access to dining, shopping, recreating, and entertaining options, with increased opportunities for educated, “white collar” jobs which our population would already support, Conway could be that “Community within a Community” creating an attractive alternative inside the metro area that offers a high quality of lifestyle and smaller community feel yet is also easily accessible to the greater cultural amenities of the larger metro. Conway actually already achieves this position to some degree but the above outlined steps could more definitely carry Conway into its new role. As Conway positions itself among its metro partners; it is also helping position the Little Rock Metro area vis-à-vis other metro areas.

In moving towards its emerging role, Conway is presented with a special opportunity to build in itself what it is to become for the foreseeable future. With high community design standards, excellent quality of lifestyle options, and a job market that includes both manufacturing and information/ high tech opportunities, Conway can build a future it can proudly pass down to the succeeding generations.
We can only build when we are growing. It is that growth; it is that change that now presents us a choice for the future. There is a Wisdom of Motion and a Wisdom of Staying Still. Yes, the public wishes we apply the Wisdom of Staying Still to our tax structure, but there are many and great opportunities to apply the Wisdom of Motion to shape Conway for the ages. Nor is it only for our benefit but it would also be for the benefit of those from all over our area and our state, both now and in the future, who seek the promise of opportunity that the name CITY OF CONWAY already implies.

Conway’s current prosperity is certainly the “substance of things hoped for,” but there is more. The role into which Conway could emerge can also be envisioned inside this prosperity as well. It is in that vision, that this prosperity becomes the “evidence of things yet unseen!”

This is indeed a special opportunity!