

Good evening. It is my honor to welcome you, the citizens of Putnam County, to our first State of the County. On behalf of my fellow county commissioners, we are delighted to see each of you.

Before I begin, I wish to acknowledge my gratitude to the people of Putnam County for allowing me the opportunity to serve as your representative. To my colleagues on the Putnam County Commission - Commissioner Somers, Commissioner Harris, Commissioner Laibl, and Commissioner Taylor, I extend my thanks for your support and your faith in me as your Chairman.

I am proud to serve with a team of elected leaders that bring a diverse background and experience to local government policy making. Our Vice-chairman, Commissioner Hermon Somers, is a strong advocate of law enforcement, public safety and passionately promotes neighborhood pride. Commissioner Nancy Harris is a champion of the St. Johns River, an advocate of those who volunteer and a loving and caring voice of those who are less fortunate. Commissioner Chip Laibl promotes the quality of life benefits of providing diverse recreational opportunities for those of all ages and implementing smart growth policies. Commissioner Ed Taylor is a champion of common sense governing and delivering

efficient transportation services. Please help me thank them for their service.

When I talk about the state of the County, I am including our municipalities and constitutional officers. Words can not express how much respect I have for the dedicated men and women who provide city leadership. And, without the support of our constitutional officers we would be ordinary – instead of extraordinary. I believe we share the same values and goals. We all want to provide our citizens with equitable, professional and courteous service. We all want safe communities for our families and good schools for our children. We want quality jobs and a strong, growing economy. We want a natural environment, with fresh air and clean water. I believe our citizens want their governments to work together on these core values because they benefit everyone.

We are positioned positively for the future as a result of the dedication and hard work of those who came before us. They have provided the building blocks necessary to allow us to look into the future with optimism. For their hard work we are grateful and they remind us that our decisions will affect the quality of life of future generations. The State of our County is not one of perfection – but

rather one of challenges to be met, goals to be set, and the commitment to results so we may leave a legacy that is respected for its thought and deliberation. By meeting these mandates, we safeguard our County's diverse and rich heritage and assure that in years to come the State of the County will continue to be solid, and full of promise.

Tonight we begin a tradition that celebrates our County's resources and successes - defines our goals – what challenges lay ahead and begin to recognize and thank the people who make Putnam County great – our citizens. Without their uplifting support - Putnam County would be a very different place. Over 200 citizens from all walks of life, serve on a variety of committees, task forces and councils that contribute to the policy decisions we make on your behalf. We are grateful for this support.

Tonight's State of the County address is a result of a recommendation from a citizen serving on a task force. Rose Mary Anderson, who is in the audience tonight, with the support of fellow task force members, brought forth recommendations that suggested the elected leadership periodically inform the citizens of the activities of government. Please stand to be recognized. Thank you and thanks to all our volunteers who contribute so much. We

are dedicating this year to celebrating those who volunteer. To show our appreciation, Commissioner Harris has taken the lead to co-chair a volunteer appreciation event scheduled this spring. Commissioner Harris and Ms. Cynthia Asia, with Volunteer Putnam will partner with the United Way, the Palatka Daily News, Georgia Pacific and others to organize this year's event. We want to say thank you to those who contribute their time and talent to improve the lives of others.

I report tonight that Putnam County is strong as a result of the oversight of the members of the Putnam County Board of County Commissioners and the dedication of the staff led by our County Administrator, Rick Leary - please stand and be recognized? I know I speak for the Commission when I say I have every confidence in him and his staff to support and implement the goals and objectives of the County Commission.

As we approach the budget preparation; Putnam County will continue its sound conservative practices and will demonstrate fiscal discipline. We will challenge staff to bring forward efficiency and operational cost saving. We understand your expectation of us and the responsibility of being the stewards of the public trust. We will work each day to gain that trust. I report to you that Putnam

County is in healthy and stable financial condition and has been recognized for 20 consecutive years by the Government Financial Officers Association for excellence in budget preparation. We will continue that outstanding record of excellence on your behalf.

In the months to come, we must begin to assess the financial impacts of proposed property tax reforms being discussed in the upcoming legislative session in Tallahassee. We must all come to terms with the fact that 42% of all services your local government provides are funded through the collection of property taxes.

Things have changed since September 11, 2001 and many of our sons and daughters serve this great nation and are in harms way all around the world - fighting to preserve our freedoms. Let's salute our men and women who have served and continue to serve this great country.

Recognizing this and the sacrifices of past generations, Putnam County stands committed, through our Veterans Services Office, to provide the necessary assistance to over 10,000 Putnam County veterans. This is especially important with world events mandating that our local reserve forces be called upon to help our active military forces. Because we recognized the tremendous need, the

Veterans office now provides services weekly in our government service centers in Interlachen and Crescent City.

One of the County's greatest challenges is to provide a social service network to those in need. Putnam County has worked to expand a variety of services and partnerships to ensure that the diverse social needs of the entire community are met. Funding for the Women's Resource Center, Habitat for Humanity, the Lee Conlee House, the Health Department and Putnam Behavioral Healthcare enable each respective organization to provide much needed services and solutions for those in need. In 2006, the County satisfied the loan on the Putnam Behavioral building for 1.1 million dollars and currently provides 300,000 dollars of operational revenue to insure mental health services remain viable and continue to be provided in Putnam County. Our Health Department is second to none, recently expanding its services to the western and southern portions of the county. The commitment to reaching out so the needy have every opportunity to get care represents what this community is all about. The county makes an annual commitment of 311,000 dollars toward operational costs and this year dedicated 100,000 dollars toward the Health Department Building Expansion Project of 3,000 square feet, which was completed days ago and we all look forward to the grand opening

later this month. These important investments will insure that these social service organizations will be able to continue to meet the health needs of our citizens.

In 2006, The Board of County Commissioners adopted a new Affordable Housing Plan for the purpose of expanding our affordable housing opportunities with SHIP (State Housing Initiative Partnership), down payment assistance for first time homebuyers and assistance with housing rehabilitation. In the last 18 months, over \$525,000 has been directed in Putnam County to provide assistance for qualified applicants for new construction and rehabilitation throughout the county. As a result of these initiatives, citizens are buying homes and raising the standards of existing homes in neighborhoods. In addition, we are currently working with the Palatka Housing Authority to locate 25 lots outside the city of Palatka for new affordable housing construction for our teachers, police and health care workers.

There is no other time in our history where more resources have been dedicated to improving our transportation system. Our Federal and State elected delegation are working with us to insure our state highway systems are improved to support the demand of our citizens and businesses. The 4-laning of the Highway 20 and 17

corridors remain our number one priority and improvements to Highway 19 and 100 in the urban service area of Palatka are not far behind. Completing Highway 20 through western Putnam County will complete the I-95 to I-75 connector and 4-laning Highway 17 will be a vital component for future economic development while providing an alternative route for evacuation for our citizens and our coastal neighbors.

A wide variety of drivers and vehicle types share the 1,838 miles of county roadways every day in Putnam County, with thirty five percent of our citizens having homes on an unpaved street.

In January of 2003, the county announced that 50 miles of unpaved roads would be paved by 2008 as part of the Better Place Plan. At this time, over 39 miles are completed with 12.3 under construction completing the commitment about 6 months ahead of schedule. We have begun to identify the next group of unpaved roadways to prepare for paving. In addition, 7 miles of unpaved roads have been paved as part of the county partnering with residents through an assessment program.

At this time, I can report the completion of our 100th mile of resurfacing or 26 percent of paved road system. This investment

insures safe travel in all conditions for those new and seasoned drivers and insures future generations are able to manage the increasing costs and demands. In addition, almost forty miles have been widened county-wide to provide safe driving lanes on our county collector road ways. 309, 315, Yelvington, Federal Point, 21, and 20-A. Also, 308-B is currently under construction.

Our public transportation system continues to increase riders as a result of our new trolley, bus shelters, and advertising assistance from the community newspaper. This year - routes will be increased, a passenger brochure and route marketing campaign will be distributed promoting new riders and building on last year's success. Funding and authorization to develop a bus that is designed to meet the needs of our passengers while being capable to operate on our unpaved road system will highlight next year's work plan. Also, look for some exciting bus graphics that promote the special parts of our community.

While there has been historical progress related to all aspects of our transportation system, we understand that we must continue to look toward the future. And to insure we identify our long range transportation needs - the board, in January, has began the work of developing the County's Master Transportation Plan which will

define our transportation needs into 2030. All aspects of how we approach our transportation responsibilities are under review. I believe there will be significant reform related to how we deliver services to unpaved systems and how existing and future land use policies will contribute to the location of a second bridge and future corridor needs.

Economic development is tied into transportation. If we're going to bring jobs to the County, we need the transportation corridors to support the job centers. We understand that good jobs are always a key component of an economically successful community. The goal continues to be twofold: attract new business and industry to the County and help existing businesses and industries prosper.

The Putnam County Business Park is thriving and prospects bringing jobs to our community continue to show interest in available land and the county's 50,000 square foot magnet building.

Several new businesses were announced recently including Marble Today, MTX Marine, First Coast Recycling, and International Barge & Equipment. We welcome each new job provider.

The board celebrates a very successful 2006 with our Putnam County Chamber of Commerce – our economic development arm. On a state-wide basis in 2006, Putnam County ranked as second behind Alachua County in the “populations under 250,000” category for *Capital investment* with \$57.7-million dollars; and second behind Okeechobee County in the same category for *Job Creation and Retention* with 1,090 jobs. Building on the success of 2006, an expanded county economic development strategic plan has been approved for the coming year. The new plan is expected to build on our past successes which included Putnam County being named the No. 1 Small Market County in the southeastern United States for 2005; and the number ONE rural market for the southeast United States in 2006.

We will utilize our Enterprise Zone and the Florida Rural Area of Critical Economic Concern designation to attract new business. Through the leadership of our chamber we will continue to focus on our regional participation in the Regional Cornerstone program and the North Florida Economic Development Partnership; as well as utilizing our leadership role in the Rural Issues Work Group established by Enterprise Florida to promote rural Florida Job Development. Those regional relationships have served us well in competing with other communities.

Also, as we experience quality growth in Putnam County and work to balance the growing population with providing jobs and maintaining a high quality of life, we realize that our county lines tend to “blurr.” It becomes more and more important that we establish and retain regional relationships. Our Board of County Commissioners led by the current Chairman of the Regional Council - Commissioner Chip Laibl - will have a strong voice on the Northeast Florida Regional Council. The services offered by the Regional Council are priceless.

The St. Johns River, Ravine Gardens, the National Forest, the row crops of East Palatka, the managed forest of Welaka and Dunn’s Creek State Park represent some of what is great and unique about Putnam County. Our high quality of life is directly tied to the aesthetic and ecological value of our open spaces.

Developing a comprehensive plan that focuses on preservation of open space will be vital to achieve a balanced, vibrant and sustainable community. In addition to the 23 percent of the property in Putnam County which is in public ownership, we have adopted smart and sustainable growth policies that require well planned development to maintain the value of natural lands by

limiting densities, preserving environmentally sensitive lands with upland buffers and limit impervious surfaces.

Making farming a viable business option for our local producers is vital to keeping farm land in production for future generations. It is not difficult to recognize that rising land values, the uncertainty in a trendy nutritional market and impacts from hurricanes have stressed our farmers like never before. Putnam County, through our Cooperative Extension Director, has been working to help our local farmers to stay in the business. Some of the major highlights are:

The re-established Hastings Research Demonstration Unit. This important agricultural education and research complex will serve as a central place where current and future farmers can go for leading information on new crops, technology, conservation and best management practices. It will also serve as an educational center for citizens to better understand the value of active agriculture in their community. A special thanks to our partners, St. Johns and Flagler Counties, Institute of Food and Agriculture Sciences, the St. Johns River Water Management District and our state representative Joe Pickens for their leadership in making this possible. This represents our best hope to keep our farmers active.

We also created the tri-county Agriculture Committee where planners, farmers, developers and policy makers are working together on common agriculture preservation goals and bringing recommendations to elected officials in Putnam, St. Johns, and Flagler counties. This committee insures a continued dialogue between groups to define shared goals and a forum to work through differences.

We have secured 500,000 dollars in grant dollars and completed the clearing of the Etoniah Drainage District canal system. Recent hurricanes destroyed the canal system in west Putnam County that serves as the major drainage system for over 300 square miles of ranch and farm lands.

We the assistance of our federal and state delegation; we secured 3 million dollars for Putnam County fern growers whose hammocks and saran were destroyed in recent hurricanes. Many farmers believe the industry would not have recovered in Putnam County without this assistance.

The board, in cooperation with the Trust for Public Lands, kicked off the St. Johns River Greenprint, a detailed conservation plan, which will identify key natural sites along Florida's longest river.

Commissioner Harris will lead this effort with the assistance of our citizens to identify locations, secure those properties and invest in the development of those sites to bring us closer to our greatest natural resource. The board will evaluate the results of the first stakeholder meeting and take immediate steps in the next 60 days to prepare a proposal for the spring funding cycle. The formal plan will be completed in September of this year.

In January, the board adopted the Master Multi-Use Trails Plan, a linear park system that connects us with other state-wide trail systems, public lands and unique destinations through out the county. The recently created Putnam Trail Council will provide recommendations to the board related to planning, funding, destinations and promoting trail projects. We will be going to each community for input in the months ahead to get input from residents to build a system we all can be proud of. We believe the added value of a linear trail system will be a major tourist attraction, economic benefit and valued community open space amenity.

As you can see, work has been underway to preserve what we value most but seldom has there been formal adoption of policies that outline a comprehensive strategy of preservation. That ends

tonight. The board will dedicate the coming months to outline how we approach preservation and formalize a blueprint which will guide us in the future. As your elected leadership, we will bring this important quality of life issue to the forefront and see it through.

The time is right to find new ways to grow that not only maintain the quality of life, but also improves it by providing increasing recreational opportunities throughout the county. The mission of the board, through the Parks and Recreation Department, is to provide clean, safe and well-maintained leisure facilities and programs to the citizens of Putnam County. Parks and Recreation covers a very broad range of services for all ages and the board has increased the budget from 300,000 dollars to 1.3 million over the last five years and our citizens have responded by increasing their participation in our programs from 750 persons to well over 4,000.

Acquisitions of Heritage Park in Melrose, Tanglewyld in Bostwick, and property adjacent to the Theobold' Central Complex adds open space value to a few of the 17 parks around Putnam County.

Playgrounds, parking, security fencing and boat ramp and docking improvements highlight 2006 with plans for the construction of skateboard parks and other amenities coming in 2007.

In reflection, last year the Board was honored to rename the Central Triangle Park Complex in memory of John Theobald, who shaped the spirit of so many by mentoring youth through athletics. The John Theobald Central Complex will remind future generations of how one person can make such a difference in so many lives.

With all the investment into our park systems and programs, I am the most proud of the opening and programming at the Edgar Johnson Senior Center. Opening in 2005, the participation has seen steady growth since the doors opened. Yoga, health counseling, field trips, card games, dancing and bingo fill the center with togetherness and hope. I do not know of a greater feeling for me, than to see those people who have given so much, to have such joy in their lives. That place rocks!

We are not stopping there; the new Bostwick Community and Senior Center will celebrate the official commencement of activities on February 23rd. The board's commitment to expanding senior recreational programs and the hard work of the recreation department staff will continue to bring our citizens together.

With our population and calls for service increasing, the Commission also has taken several significant actions to position

itself to meet future challenges. The board has purchased the Azalea Plaza which will serve as the future central governmental complex. This 1.2 million dollar purchase of 82,000 square foot of space was purchased to eventually consolidate the core county government services for the next 30 years. An architectural firm has been contracted for the design of Phase I with construction tentatively scheduled to begin in late spring and completion in the first quarter of 2008. This important expansion will house a one stop permitting office, the growing space needs of the Supervisor of Elections Office and Governmental administration. The one stop permitting office will bring planning, building, public works, and the environmental health division of the Health Department together to better serve our citizens through the permitting process. Also approved by the Commission was the purchase of an additional 56 acres next to the Sheriff's Office for a future Judicial/Public Safety Complex. This important purchase will solidify the Sheriff and judicial systems land needs for years to come.

The Library System has seen increases in citizen usage over the last year county-wide. Library resources like audio books, internet and use of the video collection have been big hits. Revenues for computer upgrades in all the libraries are secure and installation is underway and will be completed soon. The highlights of this year

will the ribbon cutting ceremony of the new expansion of the Interlachen Branch Library and the completion of the renovated historic Bostwick School house which will serve as the community's library. Parking lot improvements will be completed in Crescent City and Melrose, while beatification improvements are scheduled at the Palatka Branch Library. The library is again supporting the third year of One Book, One Read; which is "To Kill a Mocking Bird" this year. I would encourage each of you to participate.

Many, if not all, of the capital improvement projects would not be possible without the approval of the Better Place Plan. In 2002, you approved a growth management initiative designed to meet the current and future needs of our citizens. These needs are a result of 1,300 people from all walks of life and locations speaking in one voice during visioning sessions to its leadership. The success of this plan is a result of so many – but there were a core group of citizens that believed we deserved a better future and dedicated their time and talent to nurture it in its early stages to insure it had the best possible chance to succeed. There are two citizens here tonight that stand out to me as being instrumental in the success of this historical initiative. Joyce Miller and John Newbold - please stand to be recognized. These citizens represent what is best about where we live. The county continues to leverage Better Place funds with

federal, state, local and private sector contributions to improve neighborhoods. We are entering the fourth year of a fifteen year planning horizon designed by the people

The board has made great strides, in recent history, in supporting the Public Safety function of government. These important 24 hours a day, 7 days a week organizations provide for the routine emergency needs of the public on a daily basis, as well as maintaining readiness to provide immediate action in man-made or natural disasters. The first priority of the Public Safety system is to ensure that it can provide a prompt, reliable and effective response to emergency incidents.

The board adopted last year, a 10 year Fire Protection plan that invests 40 million dollars for facility, equipment, water-supply, training and personnel resources to support our volunteer fire departments. Elements of the plan already underway include identified water supply locations and the implementation of the volunteer fire fighters incentive pay and additional compensation for paramedics and EMT's who are certified as Fire Fighter II. The board has funded a new Volunteer Firefighter Coordinator to insure the stations have a point of contact and specific attention to station needs is met. Additional staff and equipment resources are in place

in southern and western parts of the county that will provide fire support to our volunteer stations.

The men and women who respond on our behalf in the event of medical emergency are dedicated professional who provide the pre-hospital emergency care second to none. These dedicated staff utilize eight available ambulances that are equipped with the best in cardio and respiratory equipment to stabilize patients for hospital care. New, advanced medical equipment has been purchased to provide a real time picture of what the status of the patient is, in the field. An additional Basic Life Support (BLS) unit has been placed in Florahome which has shortened response time in west Putnam County.

Next year, we are committed to equip all law enforcement with automatic external defibrillators assigned to every patrol car to respond more quickly.

Preparing for, responding to, recovering from and mitigating the loss of a natural or man-made disaster continues to be an important part of Florida living. Our community has seen the impacts of a train accident, tornados, hurricanes and a chemical spill which have tested our comprehensive emergency management capabilities. Lessons learned from these incidents only reinforce our

resolve to become better prepared in the future. 2 million dollar of improvements to our emergency communications system are now complete and providing portable unit coverage like never before. Law Enforcement, Fire, Rescue and all responding outside agencies can communicate efficiently in the event of an emergency.

An important part of the county's responsibility before, during and after an event is to provide control and command throughout the complete recovery of the incident. Our staff and other agencies coordinate these efforts in a hardened facility which we call the Emergency Operations Center or (EOC). The county recently purchased a 20,000 square foot building – the old BellSouth building on Highway 19 for 1.125 million dollars. As a result of this investment, the county has been able to secure Federal and State funds in excess of 1.4 million dollars to complete the renovations and provide the necessary communication and technology needed. This building will be utilized for the upcoming hurricane season and all modifications completed in 2007. I want to applaud our staff for their efforts on this project – this almost 3 million dollar project will provide capacity equal to other EOC projects around the state for less than half the price. This demonstrated how innovative and dedicated to savings our staff is and we applaud their efforts. To continue in our preparation to a multitude of incidents, a mock

exercise is scheduled for February 15th. The event will simulate a hostage situation in a governmental building. I can't wait to see who gets taken hostage.

The county is breaking new ground with the construction of the East Putnam County Region Water System. This important 26 million dollar investment will begin to address water supply needs for current users and future growth in the East Putnam County region. Construction will begin by early summer and the first phase will be ready for operation in March of 2009.

This year, the county is partnering with the municipalities and the St. Johns River Water Management District to develop a future water supply plan that identifies our future water supply needs and the sources of water available for the next fifty years. This work should take about a year to complete.

Finally, I believe tonight's report begins a new tradition of communicating to you about what is happening in government. The board believes your local government leadership has an obligation to keep you informed about issues that will affect you and your community. So, to build on tonight's report the board is finalizing a outreach program that utilizes all means available to communicate

timely information about important governmental happenings. Tonight we announce an expanded utilization of television in partnership with the school system on Channel 8 and 17. We are working to develop programming dedicated to keeping you informed. We will kickoff our programming schedule off in late March. Also, we will utilize our print, radio, and electronic media to keep you informed. We are very excited about the possibilities and remain committed to keeping you up to date and in the loop.

Success, for a government, is not achieved by the efforts of the individual; but through a collaboration of ideas, imagination, regard and respect of others, and the combining of resources to meet the needs of our citizens. In Putnam County, we work together with our local elected officials, our State delegation, and our US Representatives and Senators on transportation, preservation, quality of life issues, and the many other initiatives. In Putnam County, we have a golden opportunity to ensure a better quality of life for our residents. We can provide them with safer roads, more time to spend with their families and a cleaner environment.

I would like to close as I began, by recognizing the importance of our citizens and how they shape Putnam County. It should be clear to all of us that we cannot solve these problems alone. We have

many strengths and resources among us, and we must draw on all of them together to confront our challenges in ways that make sense for us. Thank you for coming tonight. I look forward to working with you all this year, and for years to come. God Bless you and God Bless Putnam County