

Thank you, Lamar, and all of the employees here at Parma's GM Metal Center for hosting us tonight. I'd like to say thank you, too, to Tom Mock for his help and also thanks to Katie POKORNY and the Facility Services staff for their assistance tonight.

We've got lots of good news to share tonight, but first, I'd like to acknowledge some people who are here with us:

First things first, my wife Pam and my children Jack and Molly, whose love and support are everything.

My Cabinet Staff:

Chief of Staff Mike Culp
Service Director Brian Higgins
Safety Director Tom Weinreich
City Engineer Paul Deichmann
Human Resources & Purchasing Director Renee Guy
Recreation Director Mickey Vittardi
Senior Center Director JoAnn Mason
Communications Director Jeannie Roberts
Economic Development Director Erik Tollerup
Public Housing Director Priscilla Pointer Hicks
City Grant Writer Shelly Cullins

City Council Members:

Vito Dipierro
Debbie Lime
Mark Casselberry
Kristin Saban
Al Divis
Larry Napoli
Brian Brochetti
Dennis Kish
Jeff Crossman

Clerk of Council Ken Ramser
City Council President Sean Brennan
City Treasurer Tom Mastroianni
City Auditor Brian Day
Law Director Tim Dobeck
Clerk of Courts Marty Vittardi
Police Chief Joe Bobak
Fire Chief Mike Lasky

Lynn Vittardi, representing U.S. Representative Marcy Kaptur
Former Parma mayor Dean DePiero
County Council member Scott Tuma
Seven Hills Mayor Richard Dell'Aquila
Parma City Schools Superintendent Carl Hilling

Thank you all for being here tonight.

A little more than two months ago, December 14th in fact – I won't forget that date because it was a great day to be mayor – I had the privilege of being here at the Parma Metal Center when Lamar announced GM's plans to invest \$218 million into the plant.

I'll tell you – I don't know who was more energized – the employees or me.

I think they deserve a round of applause for all of the great work they do here

GM's decision is a true testament to the plant's workers, the management team, and the partnership the two share. This major commitment helps secure the plant's future in Parma – so critical for the workers employed here and crucial for our city and Northeast Ohio.

Ever since GM opened the plant in 1948, the success of this factory has been incredibly important for our community. Our families have worked here for generations. Our dealerships in Northeast Ohio – like Axelrod Buick GMC – sell GM-made cars on their lots. And our residents often look at the strength of the plant as a reflection of our own fortunes.

Less than a decade ago, however, the fortunes of the plant, of GM, and of the city appeared bleak amid the worst economy since the Great Depression.

But GM – given up for dead by so many – has come back strong through the dedication, sacrifice, and toil of those who work for perhaps one of the most important companies in United States history.

Parma, too, has come a long way since then as we've faced up to our challenges. All of us – together – have confronted the effects of the recession, the near collapse of the housing market, and the millions upon millions of dollars we've lost through state funding cuts.

Parma, like GM, is on the comeback trail

Perhaps that confidence in our future – that pride of place – is best encapsulated by the slogan and hashtag, "#ThisIsParma." It's a phrase we've embraced from the Young Professionals of Parma to showcase our city.

Tonight, I'm going to do exactly that.

And I hope those in the audience who live here – or are visiting here – spread the message that Parma is a city of opportunity – from our great neighborhoods and recreation to our educational institutions and our business community.

This is Parma

(PAUSE)

The Parma we know – and the one people are rediscovering – is home to strong neighborhoods that reflect our ethnic diversity in a way that honors our old-world roots while being very much in the present.

If you read local and national stories about the latest trends in neighborhood development, you'll find there is a growing desire – particularly among millennials – to live in areas that are unique, affordable, and walkable.

We have that in Parma. And we're seeing the results.

Parma, according to the latest data available, was one of the top cities our population or lower to attract millennials from 2014 to 2015. Those figures even garnered the attention of a professor of urban planning who contacted to us to learn how we're attracting that age group to our city.

In addition to that pattern, housing market statistics from the Akron Cleveland Association of Realtors, who are represented here tonight, show the demand for our neighborhood homes is growing. From December 2015 through December of last year, the average days homes were on the market decreased by nearly 28 percent. And in that same time frame, the median sold price for houses increased by 14.6 percent.

(SLIGHT PAUSE)

Our neighborhoods certainly are a source of strength for us – and a foundation upon which we can build.

Just today, people and media from all over the Northeast Ohio region flocked to our bakeries in Polish and Ukrainian villages. They were attempting to grab as many Paczkis as they could for Fat Tuesday. For almost a month now, there have been stories in newspapers and on TV featuring our bakeries – but also featuring Parma. There's a reason we've self-proclaimed our city as the Paczki Capital of Ohio.

But it's not just on days like this that our neighborhoods are on display – you see it with the fish fries, the pierogi sales – the gleam that comes off the domes of our Ukrainian churches. And soon, we'll make the trek to State Meats with the giant, inflatable Easter bunny on top of the store's roof.

Indeed, our best marketers are those small businesses that dot our neighborhood landscapes. One of them – Rudy's Strudel's Lidia Trempe – has promoted Parma and her business by cross-marketing products here locally, in Cleveland, and across the region. Her brand of old-school is hip has found a welcoming audience for her business – and for Parma.

And the city is working to strengthen our neighborhoods even more.

We spend about \$360,000 each year in block grant funds to help improve, among other things, sidewalks, streetscapes, and storefronts in commercial and residential areas.

Over the past six years, we've sought and received nearly \$24 million in loans and grants that we've put into our infrastructure. And we intend to leverage similar funding sources to focus on our improving our aging roads.

We support the Polish Constitution Day parade and festival – which gets bigger every year. More than 8,000 people attended last summer, and in fact, Parma's Constitution Day parade and afterparty are the second-biggest in the country, just after Chicago's. I want to thank the Polish Village volunteers, Councilwoman Debbie Lime, and Economic Development Director Erik Tollerup for all of the hard work they put in to make this a success.

Another successful event that is coming to be identified with our city is the annual Run/Walk for Pierogies, which is organized every year by City Council President Sean Brennan. This year's run & walk will be July 1 at the Tri-C West Campus and will feature pierogis from our friends at Perla Homemade Delights, which was our first-ever Parma Business of the Month.

Ukrainian Village, too, is a source of pride for Parma, and we boast of the largest Ukrainian population in the state. The Ukrainian Village parade, as everyone knows, is a must every year.

And I'm excited to say we've just started working on a project to develop a relationship with the vibrant Ukrainian community in Chicago to exchange ideas and programs – and to showcase what've done in our city, and to see what they've done in theirs. We are hopeful this idea can turn into a reality.

Meanwhile, in the West Creek-Quarry District, we're working to re-imagine the reaches of the Broadview/Rockside corridor.

Partnering with the West Creek Conservancy through a \$75,000 grant, the city is developing a long-term plan to rebrand and retrofit the area into an even more of a livable and walkable community – a vision that incorporates nearby recreation, transportation, development, and additional pedestrian connectivity.

We look forward to continuing our work with West Creek and Executive Director Derek Schafer. And I want to thank Auditor Brian Day and Council members Kristin Saban and Jeff Crossman for their work on this.

(PAUSE)

Now, one of the key ingredients in keeping our great neighborhoods strong – and our city for that matter – is a housing market that is stable with quality homes that are affordable and attractive for potential homebuyers.

Despite the home mortgage crisis that led to the Great Recession, Parma – though it took a major toll on us – weathered the storm in large part due to our hardworking residents who invested in their homes. We have held a strong 74 percent owner occupation rate. I think we can all agree that a community with a high percentage of vested homeownership is one that maintains safe and attractive neighborhoods.

We cannot take that for granted, and we must build upon that foundation by continuing to attract young families and young professionals here to Parma to ensure our city's future. We must achieve a balance in our local economy and within our neighborhoods.

That is why, this year, I want to build upon the success of the First-Time Home Buyers Program and develop a similar effort targeting young, college-educated families and professionals. It's a concept I've brought up before, and one I believe we should work on to help make our neighborhoods even more attractive and strong. We want to take another hard look at making such a program a reality and seek a viable funding stream for it.

Many of our employers – such as University Hospitals, MetroHealth, Tri-C, the Cuyahoga County Library system – are hiring young professionals who are working in Parma.

We need them not only to work here, but live here. That's because maintaining and strengthening our neighborhoods is vital for our city's future.

(PAUSE)

Beyond our diverse and livable neighborhoods, Parma also offers recreational opportunities and activities that enhance our quality of life and make it an attractive place to live and work.

The Cleveland Metroparks' West Creek Reservation – and all of the endeavors on which the Conservancy partners with us – provides a truly distinct recreation experience in a city such as the size of Parma – the seventh-largest city in Ohio, if you haven't heard me say that before.

More than a hundred thousand people last year visited the park and the Watershed Stewardship Center – one of the Metroparks' real jewels.

(SHORT PAUSE)

But neither West Creek – nor the city – are content with resting on past successes. Perhaps one of the most exciting developments is the Conservancy's project, in partnership with the city, to acquire, preserve, and repurpose 80 acres of property at Parmadale.

It would be the most significant undertaking in 20 years – since the reservation's creation. The project would increase the park's size to more than 500 acres, and add an exciting dynamic to West Creek as it will integrate natural resource preservation, habitat restoration, and recreation activities – all in the heart of Parma.

How fortunate are we to have such a natural resource in our city and all the recreation opportunities with which it brings? The reservation really makes Parma unique.

(PAUSE)

Our partnership with West Creek, though, is just one example of a partnership that is helping to improve recreational opportunities.

The collaboration between the senior center and the YMCA on the Silver Sneakers program and the wellness center exercise room has meant a big increase in memberships for the Center. The YMCA's figures show that seniors at the center last year used the equipment at least 19,529 times.

While helping improve the health of our seniors, the partnership makes financial sense as the YMCA is paying rent to us and is paying for its staff and teachers who are working at our senior center. It's a successful partnership for us, and I want to thank Senior Center Director JoAnn Mason, the senior center staff, and the YMCA for their dedication to our seniors.

(PAUSE)

Of course, when talking about all of the recreational opportunities we have in Parma – from the senior center to West Creek – it goes without saying our Recreation Department – with the programs and activities offered – is among the best in Northeast Ohio.

Each year, we see real growth in the number of people who enjoy our recreational activities and amenities – from our youth and tot programs to our two popular mini-golf courses and our junior golf instruction at Ridgewood Golf Course.

(SLIGHT PAUSE)

However – although we have those great programs – Director Mickey Vittardi and his staff, in conjunction with our Service Director Brian Higgins, are constantly looking for ways to provide new recreation experiences in Parma.

For example, last year, we installed two pickleball courts at Ries Park. If this is the first time you're hearing about pickleball, it probably won't be the last. It's a game that combines elements of tennis, badminton, and ping pong and is America's fastest growing participant sport – in part because it appeals to kids and seniors alike. It has something for everybody – and that's exactly why we brought it to Parma.

(SLIGHT PAUSE)

This year, our Recreation Department is looking to offer even more.

We're repurposing rec space to build an outdoor street and roller hockey rink just behind Ries Youth Complex – an attraction that should be popular. We're also finalizing the construction of four new tennis courts at Veterans Memorial Park – made possible by leveraging \$75,000 in capital money we received from the Legislature. I want to thank State Senator Mike Skindell and State Representative Nick Celebrezze for their efforts to help make that happen.

(SLIGHT PAUSE)

But the most exciting addition, and one of the biggest projects we've taken on in years, is the splash pad scheduled to open Memorial Day Weekend in Anthony Zielinski Park – just across from The Shoppes at Parma.

The splash pad itself – made possible by a generous, anonymous donation – includes a zero-depth water playground with interactive and interchangeable water features. It will be surrounded by decorative fencing and landscaping. And it will be fully handicapped-accessible and free for the public.

That's not all, though.

The Parma Youth Commission, for its project this year, is working to bring Free-WiFi to the area near and around the splash pad – something likely to be enjoyed by parents as they watch their children splash around. I want thank the Youth Commission – and its co-chairs State Rep. Celebrezze and County Councilman Scott Tuma – for such a thoughtful project that will be undoubtedly popular among parents and grandparents.

(PAUSE)

The splash pad also is part of a bigger picture to draw people into our developing Town Center – called The Crossroads of Parma.

The concept – honed by those who served on the Parma Mayor's Town Center Task Force – is becoming a reality. We are harnessing the opportunities created by the attractions in this area – The Shoppes at Parma, the hospital, the golf course, Byers Field, Stearns Farm and Homestead, and the Day Drive corridor. And we recently received a master plan grant from the Cuyahoga County Planning Commission to take another step forward.

The catalyst for creating a Town Center vision began with the more than \$90 million redevelopment at The Shoppes at Parma.

The property has been completely transformed.

From my office across the street, I can see the changing-colored lights at night streaming from the tower constructed at the shopping center's entrance on Ridge Road. The parking lots are starting to fill. People are walking in and out of stores, such as Gordman's, Rally House, and Ulta. The restaurants, like Fast Eddies, Panera, Five Guys, and Pizza Fire, are busy – as I imagine Piada Italian Street Food will be when it opens. Then, there is Vista Springs Greenbriar – a beautiful senior care facility located at the development.

What a long way we've come since the property went into receivership and prospects looked dim. I want to thank PECO Real Estate Partners and the shopping center's manager, Michelle Devlin, for everything they've done to breathe new life into the property.

(SLIGHT PAUSE)

When The Shoppes at Parma officially has its opening this summer, it'll mark the rebirth of a shopping center that could've been another in a long line of dying malls in Northeast Ohio. Instead, it's a natural cornerstone for our Town Center. And we're realizing the benefits – and we can point to the growing interest in properties along Ridge Road and Day Drive.

Make Believe Family Fun Center – a brand new 27,000 square facility off Day – is an exciting example of the possibilities. Kids – and parents – can play laser tag, climb ropes, drive bumper cars, and hang out in party rooms for birthdays and other celebrations. It's a great place for families to make memories. I know my kids have enjoyed their experiences there and we're certainly repeat visitors.

(SLIGHT PAUSE)

Now, in addition to Day Drive, we're also seeing developers look along Ridge Road for potential opportunities. Panda Express, for example, recently opened. And adjacent to that restaurant ... just last week, the Parma Planning Commission approved a Firehouse Subs and a LeBron James-backed Blaze Pizza.

(PAUSE)

While there is growing retail development in the Town Center area, our small businesses throughout the city are thriving, whether along Broadview Road, in Polish and Ukrainian villages, or along Pleasant Valley.

They are an essential part of our economic fabric, and we look to partner with them so they – and our economy – can grow. In addition to the dollars we leverage to renovate storefronts, we also work with owners to market their businesses.

One terrific example of a vibrant new small business is The Little Birdie Wine Nest on Broadview Road. When the owner of the former Vineyards Wine Merchant retired, Robin Schulze swooped right in and hardly missed a beat. The Little Birdie Wine Nest was born and the business hit the ground running, with not only wine retail and tastings, but also art classes, yoga classes and work by local artists and musicians. Thanks for the investment in Parma, Robin. We're happy to have you here.

We're delighted to have DK Jones here, too, who loves to talk about Parma at every available opportunity, because she believes in the city. DK is one of the owners of Soza Fitness, along with Matt Soza, Frank Rando and Greg Simon. Soza Fitness is a past Business of the Month, because of its involvement in many charitable events and because it continually gives back to the community.

These are the kind of business owners we are attracting here in Parma – those who believe in community, who want to give back to the city, and who want to bring business into the city because that helps us all.

Our Shop Small Parma campaign – highlighted by our promotion of Small Business Saturday – grows every year and reflects the vibrancy of our mom and pop shops. You only have to look at the Shop Small Parma Facebook to see that. Our administration, Council President, Law Director, Auditor and Treasurer, along with City Council and the Parma Area Chamber of Commerce, all have worked together to make this a successful, on-going effort.

(PAUSE)

Along with our small businesses and retail development, Parma also has an economy based on private-sector investment.

Look at where we are tonight. We are in a state-of-the-art facility considered one of GM's true gems. I am so pleased we're able to show off a place that has been an iconic part of our past and so important for our future.

Not only here though, but throughout Parma's industrial sector, our businesses are strong.

(SLIGHT PAUSE)

Our healthcare sector also is thriving with the presence of University Hospitals and now The MetroHealth System. We are so very fortunate for that. Other communities have been scarred as facilities have been shuttered, leaving residents worried about their access to healthcare.

Not so here.

University Hospitals Parma Medical Center is a tremendous community asset, not only for the quality care they provide our residents, but as a major employer here. The hospital has hired over 150 full-time medical professionals over the past two years and is spending millions of dollars more in facility upgrades that will enhance our local health care.

Further, UH has invested in the community through its partnerships with us. I am grateful for that.

One example – UH teamed up with the Parma Fire Department to put in place a pilot stroke treatment program that's the first of its kind in the state. Here's how it works – Paramedics have iPads in the field to live stream patient assessments to physicians who then use the information to determine the best course of treatment – all before the stroke victim arrives in the ER. This can save valuable time – and lives.

I want to thank UH for choosing Parma for the pilot, and Chief Lasky for helping implement it within a fire department recognized for its response times and professionalism. Our firefighters are a major reason for why our city is safe.

I also want to thank the medical center's Chief Operating Officer Kristi Sink and the members of the hospital board for their commitment to the city and its residents.

(SLIGHT PAUSE)

In addition to UH, MetroHealth's footprint in Parma, including its nearby Medical Offices and Ambulatory Surgery Center, has made an impact in the healthcare of our residents – and in our economy.

Almost a year ago – actually one day shy of a year – MetroHealth opened its 24/7 emergency department when it took over the facility from HealthSpan. MetroHealth now occupies 80

percent of the building, and offers primary and pediatric care and has re-opened the retail pharmacy there.

I want to thank MetroHealth and its director of local government relations – Jim Haviland – for their efforts to increase healthcare access to our residents.

(PAUSE)

While our healthcare institutions, businesses, and corporate partners are valuable assets, so is the value our community places on education.

The Cuyahoga County Public Library – with its two great facilities and administrative offices here – is a vital, educational partner.

The Parma library branches consistently rank among highest overall in the system for total circulation and customer visits. And the branches issue thousands of library cards each year to Parma students.

We place a premium on all that the library offers our residents, and I thank all of those who work at the branches for their efforts to encourage learning.

(SLIGHT PAUSE)

Another vital educational institution in our community is Cuyahoga Community College's West Campus.

The affordable, quality education provided at the campus is even more critical at a time when families barely can pay for college. In fact, students in the Parma City School District can get a jump start on college by taking courses at Tri-C while still in high school. In fact, some kids might be able to graduate with a high school diploma in one hand and an associate's in the other – saving a bundle in tuition as they pursue a two- or four-year degree.

Apart from the education offered at Tri-C, or the job opportunities available there, the campus itself is a wonderful asset. Last year, the city's biggest summer festival, the Rib-n-Rock, which is sponsored by the Parma Area Chamber of Commerce, was held there and received rave reviews – so much so that it's heading back there this summer.

I want to thank Tri-C for being a great community partner and for continuing to open up the west campus to the community. Thank you to Tri-C President, Dr. Donna Imhoff, for the great show of leadership on our campus.

(PAUSE)

While Tri-C and our libraries are critical institutions here, the Parma City School District is the lifeblood that flows through our city.

Our community only is as strong as our schools.

That's why Seven Hills Mayor Richard Dell'Aquila, Parma Heights Mayor Mike Byrne, and myself – each of whom represent a city in the district – along with a number of our Parma local elected officials, have been actively engaged in supporting the schools. And we will continue to advocate for them – whether here locally, or down in Columbus.

(SLIGHT PAUSE)

In the fall, voters in the district's three communities passed the schools' renewal levy by a healthy margin. This May, the district put on the ballot an operating levy that would be the lowest millage increase in almost 40 years to meet its financial obligations.

Already, the district has cut millions of dollars in spending. And administrators and teachers also pitched in by donating a furlough day to keep the budget balanced.

But that's not enough to ensure kids receive the education they need to succeed.

Passage of the levy is critical – it would keep reasonable class sizes, protect the STEM program from reductions or even elimination. *And it would mean all three high schools and all other buildings would remain open over the next five years.*

I hope you will join me and other city elected officials in supporting the levy this spring – the health of our schools – and our city – depends upon it.

(PAUSE)

The health of our community also rests on the safety of our residents.

And Parma is a safe city.

This community is one of the safest its size. And our city's commitment to safety is reflected in the overwhelming support for the police renewal levy that passed in the fall.

That support may result from the belief our officers have in community policing, with our Safety Walkabout program and the department's efforts outreach to local business owners.

And later this spring, our department is going to launch another community policing effort – a bike patrol unit that would be the first in the police department's history. The unit – consisting of six officers on different shifts – will focus on business districts throughout the city. The bike patrol also will be part of the department's drug education program.

This emphasis on community policing is essential part of keeping our neighborhoods and business districts safe – by fostering relationships with the community and preventing crime before it even occurs.

I want to thank Chief Joe Bobak for pushing these important initiatives.

(PAUSE)

Throughout this speech, I've focused on a number of elements that make Parma attractive – our safety, our educational institutions, our business climate and retail development. The recreational opportunities we enjoy. And the great neighborhoods in which we live.

But what also makes Parma a great place to live, work, and raise a family are the people in our community.

I will close with just a few examples of those making a difference.

About a year-and-a-half ago, Jackie BA-RONA sent an email to my office asking how she could be a part of moving our city forward. She eventually founded the Young Professionals of Parma to help promote and market our community. Jackie is here along with other members of the group, which has organized several meetings and events and partnered with the city on our Holiday Lights Contest.

Thank you Jackie and the Young Professionals for helping to mobilize the young talent we have in our city. In fact, a number of the members of the Young Professional group are here tonight and will be gathering together afterwards to compare notes and talk about the speech.

Another group trying to improve our community is the Friends of the Parma Police – some of whom are in the audience.

This organization grew out of one of our Citizen's Police Academy classes. They were so impressed by our police officers they created a non-profit group to raise funds for training equipment. This wasn't something they were asked to do. It's something they wanted to do for those who serve and protect us, because this is our home.

The concept of home has been perfectly illustrated this year by the POGRA-BIN- SKY family, who are here with us tonight.

Alexander and Lena Pogrebensky have lived in Parma for 26 years. They came here with their two small children in 1991 as political refugees from Ukraine. Alexander, a highly accomplished artist, showed his art in galleries all over the United States.

The couple could have moved but they stayed in Parma, and their children, Natasha and Alex, went to Normandy High School.

Natasha found her life's passion in her mother's kitchen, and eventually she and Alex opened their own restaurant, Bear, in New York City. My wife Pam and I were lucky enough to eat there and thoroughly enjoyed it.

But they had the desire to bring Bear closer to home and, to our great delight, they are back among us.

Natasha, who has been called “the mother of modern Russian cooking in the United States,” could have, as they say, taken her talents anywhere. She chose to bring them home.

And although she's only been home for a short time now, already she has found a way to partner with several Parma businesses in her current job as chef at Sterle's.

It is a fond hope of ours that we can eventually entice Natasha and Alex to take their place among these young Parma business owners we've been talking about tonight.

These are the kind of people we have in Parma.

But one of the most touching examples of who we are – and those who have done so much for our city – were the 40 World War II veterans we elected officials recognized as Citizens of the Month at a City Council meeting in September.

It was such a touching and memorable evening. We elected officials simply sought to express our gratitude for those who risked their lives for our county – and for us.

It was such an honor to shake the hands of those members of the greatest generation who live among us here.

I will never forget that night, nor what they sacrificed.

This, too, is Parma.

Thank you for coming this evening.