

Mayor Robert L. Vernon
Second State of the Village Address
Village of Key Biscayne, Florida
Key Biscayne Community Center
Thursday, April 24, 2008, 7 PM

Fellow Council Members ... elected officials ... Mr. Manager ... Madam Clerk ... Village Attorney..... members of the Village administration ... fellow residents ... and honored guests. Good evening.

From here in the heart of our special small town, I welcome you to my second annual State of the Village address. Describing the state of this remarkable town is not easy. Perhaps because we are a place of such spectacular contrasts.

We have breathtaking beauty ... warmed by the tropical sun ... with tropical flowers that abound by the thousands ... and magnificent beaches that reach to the horizon. Yet we are vulnerable to the powerful vagaries of nature. We have a colorful history and a storied heritage. Yet we are a modern community with cutting-edge technology ... grand architecture ... and sophisticated fiscal management. We are an oasis -- tranquil ... safe ... and prosperous. Yet, we are only minutes away -- across a short stretch of bay -- from the advantages and challenges of a booming -- and hectic -- American metropolis.

In spite of these contrasts -- and perhaps because of them -- we remain a community of families. Families who care about each other in a town where being a good neighbor is not a bumper sticker -- but a way of life. How should I describe this place? What should I call it?

Along with the more than 10,000 men, women, boys and girls who live here, work here and play here I call it home.

Each year, your mayor stands before you and assures you that your Village is strong and your government is stable. This year is no different. We are full of life. Our destiny as one of our Nation's most enchanting small towns -- the embodiment of the American Dream -- is secure. And with this blessing comes responsibility -- and with responsibility comes spirit.

We are home to strong-willed people -- and from time to time, there is a smattering of disagreement ... frustration ... and even a bit of anger thrown in the mix. We'll talk about that a little later. But before we get to that -- I want to point out some of the many people of whom we are all very proud.

First of all, I want to thank the members of the Village Council, whose courage ... creativity ... and understanding meet the daily challenges of running our complex community.

Lady and gentlemen, please stand up so the people of your Village can thank you.

Among the biggest and most important news this year was the appointment of Chip Iglesias as our Village Manager.

After the departure last year of our beloved Jackie Menendez to the University of Miami, we undertook a long ... hard ... and transparent search to replace her. And, we found Chip. Practically in our own backyard. As Chief of Staff for Commissioner Carlos Gimenez – who is our representative to the County -- Chip had a professional insight into our Village and quickly assumed his new responsibility as the backbone of our government. He brings to us a deep understanding of government ... experienced professionalism ... and personal integrity. As well as an exquisite sense of humor.

Stand up, Mr. Manager – so we can once again welcome you --- and let everyone show you how pleased we are to have you here as such an important part of our community.

As we all know, finances everywhere in our Nation are going through a rough patch. From Washington ... through every State ... and virtually every City – and every neighborhood -- there are fiscal difficulties and deficits. Community services are being slashed ... infrastructure is deteriorating ... and the vital needs of people are unmet.

Well, not here. Not in our Village. **Here** -- our finances are strong. **Here** -- our credit rating – as a municipality – is second to none. Standard and Poor rates us AA-. You can't get much better than that.

Here – our Village millage rate was decreased again this year – now down to 3.2 -- the lowest in our history – and again the lowest in Miami-Dade County – and that includes fire service. Our reserve fund has grown to almost \$10 million.

And **here** -- our Village services continue to be the envy of everyone.

For instance, our Fire-Rescue department maintains its response time to health urgencies anywhere in the village to under three minutes and 30 seconds -- the fastest in the County and maybe the Nation. Part of this is because every sworn fire fighter is a State-certified paramedic – with at least eight professionals on duty around the clock. Even off duty, our fire fighters stand at the ready. As was Ron Erbel -- a fire fighter for 33 years, 18 years as a volunteer and thereafter, as an original member of the Fire Department founded in 1993 -- whose quick action saved the life of a neighbor's three-year-boy. Reacting to the shouts of the boy's grandfather, Ron instantly called 9-1-1 -- and administered CPR to the unconscious boy until he was breathing. Today, the child is fine, and so is Ron -- who is here with us this evening. Stand up, Ron, and let the people of Key Biscayne salute you.

Once again this year, our record of safety continues to be the best in the County. Our courageous police department -- with 30 full-time sworn officers -- responds quickly to the smallest emergency -- and that, in fact, is what keeps just about all our emergencies small.

To add to our safety, we continue to widen bike paths ... add sidewalks ... and calm traffic by narrowing the lanes ... and installing traffic circles.

Our pursuit of safety in our village goes on. Only two weeks ago, we passed an ordinance to install high-tech cameras that catch motorists who streak through red lights -- endangering pedestrians and other motorists. High definition cameras will take pictures of the offending vehicles and legally enforced citations will be mailed to their owners. This will help put a stop to the tendency of non-resident drivers who speed through Crandon Boulevard on the way in and out of Bill Baggs State Park.

At the same time, other cameras scan intersections to change traffic lights depending upon traffic flow. We are getting positively high tech around here.

Some things continue to be low tech -- but equally important. Part of our unique charm is the pride we take in the classic beauty of our community, and now we have even more reason to be pleased.

For one thing -- at long last -- the program to beautify Crandon Boulevard is complete. From the entrance to our Village to Bill Baggs State Park, the boulevard -- with its lush pocket plazas at our main intersections ... coconut palms swaying along the median ... and borders of live oaks -- is now an elegant ... and fitting Main Street for our Village.

Of course, we are not confining our capital improvement to only our Main Street.

New lights on Grapetree Drive have been installed -- and lights on Harbor Drive are under construction. Lighting up Galen and Sunrise Drives has been budgeted and will be underway soon.

Because bright streets are safe streets, we are studying ways to bury utility lines that will protect us against power and telephone outages that result from hurricanes and wind storms.

As part of our ambitious capital improvement plan, we continue to explore ways to restore Calusa Park into a pastoral meadow. With an abundance of open green space and nature paths it will become a pleasant and rustic sanctuary for all our residents.

And right here in the middle of town, there have been so many suggestions on what to do with the site of the old Citgo station on Crandon Boulevard, we are organizing a workshop to talk about it. We invite our residents to please participate.

We also continue to pay special attention to our world-famous beaches -- so vital to the preservation of our water's edge -- by speeding up their re-nourishment.

And – we are happy to report – our dune restoration program is underway. .

It's not just the land that we care about. We are working hard to find ways to control beach-front lighting that won't disorient baby turtles as they migrate to the sea – yet won't unduly inconvenience our beachfront residents. It's a delicate job and we're proud to be doing it.

At the same time, we're proud of the unparalleled success of this magnificent Community Center. Born in strife, it has become the heart and soul of our Village -- with about 5,000 members.

That's half of the people who live here. Few other municipalities anywhere can boast a statistic like that. Each day, more than 500 people – seniors ... teenagers ... children ... and just plain folks come here to exercise their bodies ... their minds ... and their need for recreation.

In fact, the popularity of this facility -- and its uses for so many diverse activities -- is expanding so rapidly that we are discussing plans to enlarge it.

One day, we will have more room for dance programs ... yoga ... lecture seriescard games ... birthday parties ... and the sweetest sound of all – the laughter of children.

This is our Village party room and – as you can see -- a really great place to make a political speech.

A lot of recreational advances are taking place outside this center. This year, we created the Key Biscayne Athletic Advisory Board to bring together all of our sports programs.

Soon their effect will be felt everywhere -- here in this building ... on the playing fields of Crandon Park ... at St. Agnes field ...on the Village Green ... and all over town. These seven devoted Villagers will make sure our youngsters – and residents of all ages – have the opportunity ... space ... and equipment for healthy athletic activity.

Another new organization fulfilling a long-time need is the Key Biscayne Historical and Heritage Society. Its 180 members are keeping alive the fascinating 2000-year-old history of our island. They are chronicling our colorful story that reaches from the Tequesta tribe of the Calusa Nation ... to Ponce de Leon searching for the fountain of youth. From swashbucklers ... to intrepid pioneers to the Seminole wars. From the land boom of the '50's ... to our incorporation as a Village 17 years ago. All the way to today.

From all of that, we have learned that progress sometimes takes odd turns. Last year, during the sometime contentious discussion about the future of the Sonesta Hotel site, the good people of Key Biscayne passed a referendum that changed dramatically the way our Village makes zoning decisions. As it stands now, few zoning decisions – however tiny ... however complex ... however intricate ... can be made without a public referendum. This has virtually ground to a halt the Village’s zoning function.

Although I understand and fully agree with the position of our residents to protect our Village against increasing density and intensity, it is important that we restore basic zoning decision back to your elected officials. Zoning is a complicated process. It incorporates such considerations as environment ... aesthetics ... customs ... preservation ... public safety ... neighborly concern ... and many more factors, and that includes definition of terms.

Therefore, I have sponsored a new referendum that will effectively allow zoning decision to be made by your elected officials – at the same time protecting the voice and desire of our citizens in any zoning matter that involves increasing density or intensity in all zoning districts.

I am telling you here – tonight -- that the rights and needs of the people who live here will be protected. That’s what you elected us to do and that’s what we are doing.

Included in the rights and needs of our community is the education of our children.

For many years, there have been discussions and plans to provide a high school for the children of our village. The conversations – and suggestions – have ranged from a public high school on Virginia Key -- to a Municipal Charter high school on the K-8 site – or elsewhere in the Village.

In this – as in other issues in the Village – I wish – as mayor – there was an easy solution. Alas, there rarely is.

Many of our residents believe there are advantages to a Virginia Key location – such as parking and large athletic fields – and, of course, the easy commute for kids who now travel 11 miles each way to Coral Gables High.

Others offer persuasive reasons to build the Charter school right here in the core of our Village, where its curriculum and choice of activities are protected from outsider control.

We are – right now – selecting education consultants to advise us as to the feasibility -- and the pros and cons -- of the choices available to us.

This is not about politics. This is about our kids. This is about their education. This is about enriching their futures.

And, to enrich the lives of our elderly, we are discussing plans to create – in the near future -- a senior center to provide them with daily social and recreational opportunities and overall quality of life.

Right now – however -- our quality of life is being impacted by something that is happening on our very doorsteps. And we are trying to make it easier. Since the first house was built on Key Biscayne – nearly 60 years ago -- Villagers have talked about sewers. Maybe even before that. Finally, it's happening. No one ever thought it would be easy. But no one ever thought it would be this disruptive and nightmarish. I understand how difficult this is for everyone. I not only understand your pain – I share your pain. I live here too. And I know the word “inconvenient” doesn't quite cover it. But -- like all of you -- I am aware that these sewers are crucial to our health and environment. Meanwhile, we are doing everything possible to make it easier for you. In fact, we are reacting in minutes to any complaint of property damage.

And even before work begins on any block, we are literally going door-to-door and visiting every house -- to alert residents what to expect. Excruciating as is, we are making progress. We have received the bids for the final two zones and we will soon be awarding the contract. So, for a while, there will continue to be the rumble of the earth -- the clouds of dust ... the closing of streets ... the clatter of equipment. And one day, it will be all over – and the memory of all this will be flushed away.

But while it is going on, think of the joys of our little Village. One of those joys is mine. I want to tell you again how honored I am to be able to serve this community – this town of homes ... and families ... and friends. We are fortunate to live here. But in reality we are only guests. In the generations to come, our children ... their children ... and others ... will enjoy and find delight in this lovely Village.

So while we are here, we will take care of it -- and leave it for them better than we found it – a hometown -- tranquil ... wonderful ... and unspoiled. But, with sewers.

Thank you -- and good evening.