

# Mayor touts city's success stories to Chamber crowd

By **Michael W. Freeman** Winter Park Forum Editor

Standing inside the meeting room at the Winter Park Welcome Center, facing a standing-room only crowd, Steve Leary noted that he was about to do something he's done quite a lot of since March, when he was elected Winter Park's new mayor.

"I've spoken so much in the last six to seven months," he said. "Today is my 94th day as mayor."

One of the most enjoyable aspects of speaking to constituents, Leary added, is that he gets to deliver the good news every time – the fact that he is presiding over a city that is clearly on the rebound, and getting stronger every day.

"We have a lot going on in the city," he said as the guest speaker to the Winter Park Chamber of Commerce's Good Morning Winter Park session.

Despite the fact that Central Florida was badly hit by the collapse of the housing market and the national recession, Leary noted that Winter Park has a lot of recent success stories to boast about.

"We haven't raised the millage rate (for property taxes) in six years," Leary said. "The Alford Inn has opened and is incredibly successful. Our Amtrak station has opened and is the most successful station on the SunRail route. Hannibal Square is thriving."

All of these successes, the mayor said, point to a city on the move.

"We're a young city," Leary said. "We're 125 years old. That's a fairly young city."

But that doesn't mean the city doesn't have some room for improvement, he added. That's why, Leary noted, he supports the ongoing vision process, that will bring together city residents to help decide what they want Winter Park to look like in the future.

In the short run, though, Leary said he plans to focus on two other critical

issues: traffic congestion, and improving the city's major commercial corridors.

On the issue of traffic, Leary said Winter Park has clearly gotten a boost from the arrival of SunRail.

"We just celebrated our one-year anniversary," he said. "We talk about congestion and traffic – that's one thing that's going to help."

He also predicted the I-4 Ultimate Project – which is widening Interstate 4 and adding toll lanes in the middle – will also help, while cautioning city residents to be aware of the short-term headaches during the six-year construction phase.

"I-4 Ultimate is going to help us in the long run," Leary said. "But in the short term, it's going to be rough."

Leary said the city will get a boost from an upcoming project. The Florida Department of Transportation is spending \$11.5 million to put electric wires underground on Harper Street behind the Walgreens store.

"That's a huge deal," Leary said. "FDOT is paying to underground those lines." The city is also putting in decorative lighting, he said.

"Folks, we're cleaning up," Leary said. "Fairbanks (Avenue) will be cleaned up and we'll start addressing the other corridors."

The city is also pursuing state funds to establish quiet zones, which are a series of safety measures in communities with railroad tracks, so the train conductors do not have to blow the whistle when the trains pass through.

"Hopefully, we'll have the quietest stretch of SunRail in the region," he said.

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