**Strategic Leadership and Governance Awards**

**THE LITTLE CITY THAT COULD**

The City of Port Richey, Florida encompasses four-square miles and contains 3,114 residents. It is known as “The Little City by the River”. More accurately it might be known as “The Little City that Could”.

Unlike those infrequent situations where there are proposals to replace the City Manager form of government with a strong Mayor form of government, for at least the fifth time in 20 years, the City of Port Richey faced a strong citizen driven initiative to dissolve the City to become a part of the unincorporated county. Citizens supporting this initiative cited few to nonexistent services, no sense of community and continuance of the City for the sole purpose of supporting pay checks for City workers as key elements in the dissolution effort.

If the City was dissolved, there would be no turning back, since Florida law now prohibits the incorporation of cities with a population of as few as 3,114 residents. The stakes were high and the challenges were many.

At the end of December, 2008 City Council engaged in an agreement with a seasoned City Manager to collectively set a new and strategic direction for our small City. The strategic direction include efforts to: visibly increase the level of services, initiate efforts to unite the three sectors of the community that have always been geographically, and at times philosophically, divided by a major state highway and river, and to provide accountability for all City workers.

The first effort was to increase the level of services to citizens. At the time the new City Manager was hired, the Fire Department had 30-year old and 15-year old fire engines. Both pieces of equipment had not been operational for a period of time, at which point the Fire Department had answered calls in a 1992 Ford Taurus. Working with the new Fire Chief, the City contracted to purchase a demonstration fire pumper that had served only as a demo at Fire Chiefs’ conferences around the nation for $200,000 less than the market value, with all new purchase warranties and guarantees in place, and financed over a 12-year period so that the City could afford it. Training of fire fighters and response times were a focus along with this capital outlay. A donation by several businessmen provided our first infrared camera.

The new City Manager totally reorganized all General Fund, CRA and Enterprise Fund Budgets to focus on services. Police units were financed over time, to replace decade old units and were marked inversely with the markings of the new fire apparatus, to set a new sense of “one city, one community”. Grants supported an additional police vehicle unit and personnel. The donation by a local businessman financed the addition of a drug K-9 to our police force.

A Utility Enterprise Fund (Water/Sewer) was operating in a deficit of approximately 1/8th of the total fund. The state of Florida had designated this fund to be in a financial state of emergency. The new City Manager and the new Utilities Manager reviewed every item in the budget and eliminated all outside consultants, where it was viewed that work could be done by in-house personnel, made major operational adjustments that would provide the provision of in-house water supply vs. the costly purchase of water from a regional provider, and on a monthly basis budgeted for yearend depreciation calculated by the auditors.

During this time, the City increased services to residents and those in our service district by rehabbing lift stations, authorizing the purchase of a new water meter system that reads and monitors water usage electronically-the second in the state of Florida- and allows residents to monitor their water usage on-line. A 180 foot tower was installed to support the new meter system providing communications for police and fire and providing tower rental space for the Coast Guard and cell providers. The City also purchased its first Vactor truck.

The City undertook projects and programs to unite and foster a sense of community. Efforts included initiating a volunteer weekend day to plant bushes and flowers on City property, equally, in all sectors of the City. Volunteer fire fighters, who augment paid staff, junior high school students, residents and staff all worked eight hours and celebrated the event with hot dogs and hamburgers donated by local businesses and cooked by City staff at the fire station. City staff organized and provided an 84th Birthday Party for the City in a City park. At no cost to City taxpayers, food, soft drinks, cotton candy and birthday cake were provided while a band played, clowns did face painting and made animal balloons.

Police and Utilities employees lead community events ranging from Easter Egg Hunts, the first National Night out, a Halloween Haunted House with over 3,000 visitors and a Christmas Toy Drive. All of these events were sponsored through donations.

Police worked closely with local cub scouts and residents to collect pull tabs from aluminum cans. Each pound of pull tabs provides a child with one “free” chemo therapy treatment at Ronald McDonald Children’s House.

City welcome signs that had been decided by a vote of the residents were erected in various parts of the City to draw us together as a City. Citywide projects were reassessed to ensure that all sectors of the City were receiving equal benefits. City parks were upgraded, with the financial assistance of state grants, and advertised to all as part of a benefit of City residency. A Citywide newsletter was resurrected and significantly upgraded with increased information and color photos, while the City website was rebuilt from the ground up modeled after user friendly websites across the nation.

The number of City of Port Richey employees has been reduced by 26% over the last several years, mainly due to the pending dissolution effort. They sought more secure employment elsewhere. With less than 50 full-time employees, this small City has provided a full service City to our residents. Services include: Utilities, Public Works, Police, Fire, Building, Planning and Zoning, Utility Billing, Finance, City Clerk’s Office, City Manager’s Office, Technology and Building Maintenance. Employees are not only on an annual evaluation schedule but now rotate through various positions in the City so that everyone is cross-trained to best serve our citizens.

The City has embraced a high performance organization approach and continuous improvement philosophy in moving towards the future.

We are very proud to still be a City and to have had an opportunity to be here to apply for this international recognition. Thank you, so much.