

## Mayor Howard Wiggs says personal connection makes Lakeland strong

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Mayor Howard Wiggs says one of the keys to Lakeland's recent resurgence is a personal connection between the city and its residents.

By **John Ceballos**



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LAKELAND — Mayor Howard Wiggs says one of the keys to Lakeland's recent resurgence is a personal connection between the city and its residents.

“When we love something, we cherish it, we protect it, and we will do extraordinary things for it,” Wiggs said. “That’s what I believe is taking hold in Lakeland.”

On Tuesday morning, Wiggs spoke for more than an hour during a wide-ranging discussion that covered many of Lakeland's recent accomplishments and glimpsed at the city's future.

The annual State of the City event took place at Good Shepherd Hospice. Paul Marois, Good Shepherd's executive director, moved to Lakeland about six months ago from Providence, R.I.

“I have children here in high school, middle school, and elementary school,” Marois said. “We are very excited to be in Lakeland. There are lots of activities for all of us, and everyone has been very welcoming.”

Retaining the city's young talent was one of Wiggs' points of emphasis. Among the topics covered during State of the City:

n Wiggs has secured commitments from the presidents at Florida Polytechnic University, Florida Southern College, Keiser University, Polk State College and Southeastern University to take part in a newly formed President's Roundtable. The first meeting is scheduled for Jan. 19.

"We don't want our No. 1 export in the city of Lakeland to be our young people," Wiggs said. "We have to have a defined recruitment and retention program."

n Wiggs, Lakeland City Manager Tony Delgado, and leadership at the Lakeland Economic Development Council have discussed the possibility of forming a nonprofit design center focused on downtown Lakeland.

"We would have this design center to plan for the future of the entire downtown," Wiggs said. "They would also look at things like, 'Where are our stumbling blocks?' and 'What's not working as smoothly as it needs to work?'"

n The city is looking to hire a new business liaison to work alongside current city of Lakeland business development manager Jason Willey.

"This will be a person who's on your side as a business person, but also on the city's side," Wiggs said.

The upcoming \$14 million renovation at The Lakeland Center and the current \$45 million renovation at Joker Marchant Stadium were also topics of conversation.

"A lot of folks don't realize that in order to have the amenities that we have in our community, they don't always pay for themselves," said Wiggs, who added that the city subsidizes The Lakeland Center about \$3 million each year. He added the Polk County Tourist Development Council is funding almost half of that facility's renovation, which is slated to begin early next year.

In addition to the renovation at Joker Marchant Stadium — which is jointly financed by the city, the county, and the Detroit Tigers — Wiggs said the city has signed a new, 20-year contract with the baseball club to maintain Lakeland as the Tigers' spring training home.

“That will give us 100 consecutive years, which is the longest-lasting relationship of any MLB baseball team,” Wiggs said. The Tigers have been training in Lakeland since 1934 and they’ve been playing at Joker Marchant Stadium since 1966.

Wiggs offered praise for the city’s police and fire departments.

According to Wiggs, the Lakeland Fire Department is one of 204 departments out of 47,696 in the United States to earn a No. 1 rating from the Insurance Services Office.

Some initiatives, however — like the Massachusetts Avenue “road diet” that has reduced a stretch of that road from four lanes to two — haven’t gone completely smoothly.

“It’s created some angst,” Wiggs said of the Massachusetts Avenue project. Earlier this month, the city announced it was sacrificing four of the new parking spots created by narrowing the road to fix a weaving route between Main Street and Pine Street. “We had some creative markings on the road, if I can use that euphemism.

“Overall, it’s working really well.”

Developments at Lakeland Linder Regional Airport, which is owned and operated by the city of Lakeland, include the announcement by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Hurricane Hunters weather squadron that it will move its staff and fleet of nine aircraft to the Lakeland airport after May 1. The airport is also scheduled to add a customs facility next year, which will allow the facility to host international travelers. Finally, a Staybridge Suites is slated to open next year, giving the airport a second hotel.

Wiggs spoke enthusiastically about each development.

“I think the city is blessed to have people like Howard Wiggs and Tony Delgado,” said Becky Bywater, one of almost 40 attendees. Bywater is the chapter chair for Central Florida SCORE, which offers free support for small-business owners. She has also lived in Lakeland since 1980.

“The way that we are growing is unbelievable,” she said.

Terry Ottinger is the vice president of membership development for the Lakeland Area Chamber of Commerce. He also served as emcee for the event.

“This is an exciting time to be in Lakeland,” said Ottinger, a third-generation Lakeland native. “I’m as excited about the city as Howard is, and it’s because we’re showing people that you don’t have to go to Atlanta, and you don’t have to go to New York.

“You can stay right here because this is a great place to live.”

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