

Remarks by Gary Chapman of the LBJ School of Public Affairs, at the annual luncheon for People's Community Clinic, May 8, 2006:

Thank you.

I want to thank People's Community Clinic for this honor of speaking today, especially my good friend Margot Thomas and other board members, and Regina Rogoff and the excellent staff of the Clinic. I have to say that it's cruel and unusual punishment to follow Kirk Watson, not only in his role as MC this year, but in his role as last year's speaker, when he gave such a fabulous speech. I am very happy, as I'm sure you all are, that Kirk will be returning to public service as our next State Senator.

As you all know, Austin is in high gear these days -- we're enjoying an era of prosperity and civic development that may be unique in the city's history. I spent last week at the World Congress on Information Technology, which I became involved with over two years ago, and it was by all reports a milestone in Austin's emergence as an international center of technology and business. It was the biggest World Congress in the 30-year history of the biennial event, and there were participants from 86 countries, most of whom had never been to Austin before. Throughout the week I heard people talking about how impressed they were with our city and with the organization and class of the Congress itself.

The World Congress was just one of many examples of how Austin is thinking big and succeeding. Before the World Congress was SXSW, now acknowledged as the world's leading independent music festival as well as the world's premier conference on digital media and the World-Wide Web. Within just a couple of years the Austin City Limits Music Festival has become one of the nation's best and biggest music events. We just opened a world-class art museum and we're well on our way to building a new performing arts center. Companies like Samsung and Home Depot are investing billions of new dollars into the region. And we consistently appear at or near the top of many lists that rank the best places to live or do business.

As I wrote last year in my column in the Austin American-Statesman, what made me especially proud of Austin was our response to the emergency evacuation of people from the Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina. Officials of the City of Austin, along with thousands of volunteers, pulled off an almost miraculous job of greeting, housing, feeding and then relocating nearly 6,000 evacuees who came to the Convention Center. Our city government and our fellow citizens showed them a level of competence and compassion that made us all proud. Mayor Will Wynn personally greeted every evacuee who came off a bus at the entrance to the Convention Center. Every child got a teddy bear. People in Central Texas donated so many things to the relief effort that the City had to ask them to stop, there was no more room to put it. When the City needed 100 volunteers late on a Saturday night and broadcast an appeal using a text ticker over "Saturday Night Live," 2,500 people showed up after midnight, and they wouldn't go home-they started picking up trash off the streets downtown. This was truly an amazing experience that revealed the heart and soul of Austin. Many of the evacuees said they felt blessed and lucky that they wound up here, and a lot of them decided to stay, which has made our city even richer, especially in musical talent.

What was striking about the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina last year is that the poor people of New Orleans were victims not only of a natural disaster but of shocking incompetence-at all levels of government-and an equally shocking lack of compassion. But when they arrived here, they were greeted with both competence and compassion, which they recognized instantly as something quite different from what they had left behind.

What many citizens of Austin don't often stop to contemplate is what might be called our "community competence," or simply the widespread distribution in Austin of the skills for getting things done and doing them well. There is a diffusion of confidence about tackling problems that need solutions, or trying something new. This makes more difference to the quality of life of a city than most people here realize-it

seems so much a part of Austin that we're like fish who don't know what water is; we live and breathe an air of confidence and competence that very few other cities enjoy.

I ran across this quote, from the British poet Alexander Pope, who wrote in 1744, "Reason's whole pleasure, all the joys of sense, Lie in three words, - health, peace, and competence."

The health of our community is a product of our daily attention to taking care of ourselves and each other, something for which Austin is also famous. We know that physical health is a precondition to a quality of life that we all expect, and widespread good health in a city is a strong and essential component of good living.

Unfortunately, we are currently burdened with a healthcare system that is manifestly incompetent. Of course I don't mean that our healthcare practitioners -- doctors and nurses and other staff -- are incompetent; quite the contrary, they are the best in the world. It is the system in which they work that is obviously broken and dysfunctional, particularly the ways in which we pay for healthcare.

As you probably know, the United States spends more on healthcare than any other nation, yet our national health status is below most other developed nations and not improving, even as we spend more and more money every year. Americans are less healthy than the British or the French or the Italians or Canadians, despite spending vastly more money on healthcare. In 2004 we spent nearly \$2 trillion on healthcare, more than we spent on food. In 1960 we spent about 6% of our Gross Domestic Product on healthcare, now we spend 16.5% and by 2015 we'll be spending 20% of GDP. Starbucks already spends more on healthcare than it does on coffee.

We have a system that has two sources of negative effects, both related to each other. For people who are insured, there is no incentive to curtail healthcare expenses. But people who are not insured have no way to pay today's healthcare costs on their own, so they tend to put off medical care until it's absolutely necessary and thus astronomically expensive. In both segments, 20 percent of patients account for 80 percent of the expenses. Someone has to pay for these expenses, so the healthy insured pay for the unhealthy insured, and at prices that condemn more and more people to uninsured status. All of us pay for the unhealthy uninsured, in the form of taxes and increased costs.

We all know that this system is slowly strangling us, especially now that we have competing costs that are also rising, like energy or paying for government deficits. U.S. automakers are sinking under healthcare costs, and it's increasingly difficult to get healthcare for small businesses, which are the engines of innovation and future productivity gains. You may be a smart person with a great idea, but you'll find it hard to attract other smart people to your company if you can't pay for their healthcare benefits. That burdens our entire economy. In a nutshell, we have an incompetent, broken, uncompassionate system in crisis.

I will spare you a dissertation on what we should do about this, although we have to do something. What's important is to recognize that smart communities must do what they can to cope with this crisis, and Austin is a smart and competent and compassionate community. We have the People's Community Clinic.

People's Community Clinic is our city's leading, independent, primary care facility for people with little or no health insurance. That's a lot of people in Austin, because Texas leads the nation in the proportion of people without health insurance. The Clinic has been around for 36 years, growing with Austin, and now serves tens of thousands of our fellow citizens every year. It is a symbol of our city's competence and compassion. It's a big part of our quality of life. It's another example of Austin doing things right and doing them well, but it's something we cannot take for granted.

What I'd like you to take away from today's event is this thought: it is the daily, routine maintenance of competence and compassion that gives our city its heart and soul. It is our support for the daily work of the People's Community Clinic that accumulates, day by day, year after year, decade after decade and generation after generation, and helps build the character of Austin.

Here, we don't wait until the hurricane hits or the earth trembles or something else terrible comes at us. We're not waiting on other people to come and help us fix our problems or show us how to do things. We don't need any of that because we take care of ourselves, and each other, and our entire city, day by day, every day, in both big and small ways. We learn from each other and from our mistakes, but by now we know how to do big things that dazzle people around the world. We got to that point by taking care of the important things first, like healthcare for everyone in Austin. We helped build People's Community Clinic as one of our best and most essential organizations, and we've done it day by day-on days like today-for 36 years.

Austin is a great place to live. We all know that, and a lot of people who don't live here know it now too. We have been blessed with great natural beauty, which we all cherish, but what makes Austin unique and special is its character, which is a product of each of us caring about where we live. That care is stronger here than in most other places. It accumulates into a sense of pride and confidence that gives us a distinct identity, one we will pass on to future generations. That identity is reflected in the way we treat each other, whether they're elderly hurricane evacuees or uninsured mothers who find the People's Community Clinic. It's reflected in the institutions we build to take care of each other.

The great architect Hugh Newell Jacobsen once wrote, "When you look at a city, it's like reading the hopes, aspirations and pride of everyone who built it."

So in addition to thanking and celebrating the People's Community Clinic with your financial support, take a brief moment as you leave today-find someone you don't know yet, and tell them thanks for helping make Austin, Texas, the greatest place to live in the whole world.

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