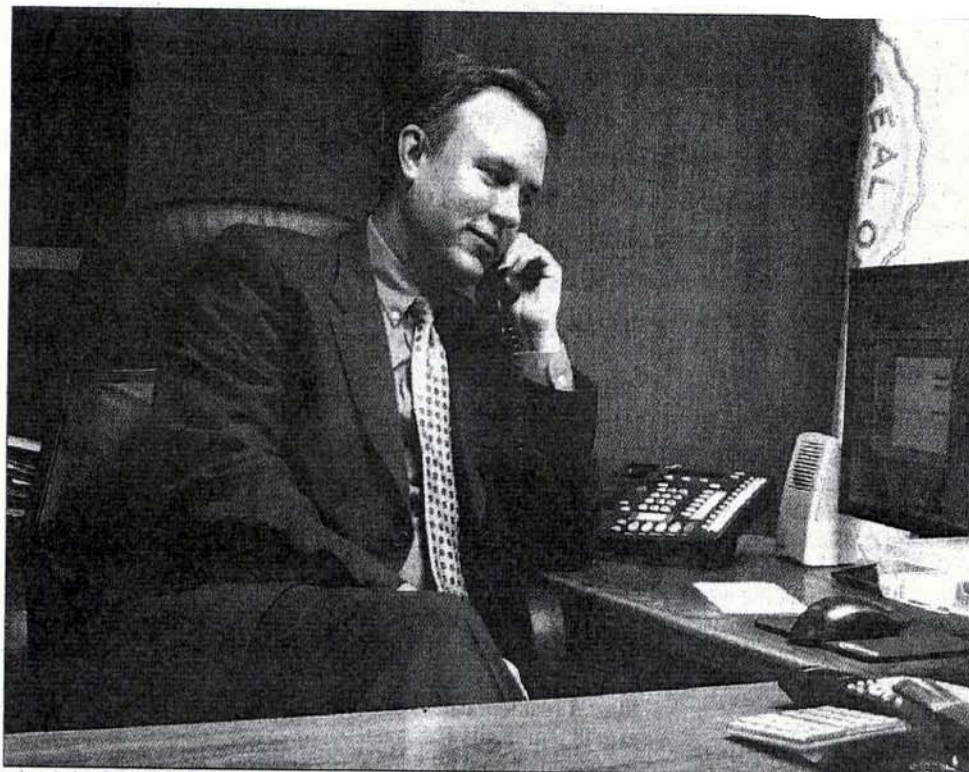


SUN POST-HERALD

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 30, 2010

FOR COMMUNITY NEWS ALL DAY, EVERY DAY

CLEVELAND.COM/SUN



KATE SPIRGEN/SUN NEWS

Lakewood Mayor Ed FitzGerald will leave office at the end of the year to become Cuyahoga County's first county executive.

Mayor: City in better shape But FitzGerald says Lakewood still facing major challenges

By Kate Spigen
kspigen@sunnews.com

During his time heading Lakewood city government, Mayor Ed FitzGerald has had to make some tough decisions. Facing the biggest deficit in the city's history as he entered office, FitzGerald and his administration have dug the city out of a nearly \$5 million deficit in the past three years. Following a restructuring of county government, FitzGerald is now moving to the newly created position of county executive Jan. 1, leaving behind a stronger,

but still fragile, city.

While Lakewood was in danger of being declared in fiscal emergency when FitzGerald took office, the budget is now much more stable, with about a \$3 million surplus. But, in order to achieve that goal, FitzGerald's administration had to reduce the city's payroll by more than 20 percent.

"Having to deal with that immediately and decisively was important," FitzGerald said. "That was an emergency situation we were

See **MAYOR, A4**



SUN POST-HERALD

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 30, 2010

FOR COMMUNITY NEWS ALL DAY, EVERY DAY

CLEVELAND.COM/SUN

MAYOR

From A1

dealing with and I feel like I am giving my successor a much better situation and a much stronger city than I inherited."

In a move to help balance the budget, FitzGerald's office ended backyard garbage collection and initiated the automated system used now. It was a change that was not popular among residents.

"The feeling was that whatever mayor or city council eliminated backyard garbage pickup would be immediately recalled from office and there were a lot of people that didn't believe it could be done politically," FitzGerald said. "We took a risk because we thought it was the right thing to do, and it ended up being a smart bet because we've saved money and it's helped us lower personnel costs."

Attempting to curb rising crime rates, FitzGerald's administration also introduced a new policing initiative with more officers and a small station in every ward. Officials and city council members also cracked down on housing law enforcement, which FitzGerald said helped decrease crime.

Over the past three years, criminal complaints in the city have decreased by about 18 percent, in part due to the initiative, FitzGerald said.

"It's always hard to say there's an exact cause-and-effect relationship when it comes to crime, because so many things affect it, but I don't think it's a coincidence that a drop in crime coincides with our law enforcement initiative," he said. "I also think it helped that we had a very strong nuisance property program and we've enforced it vigorously. That's had some positive effects for both the housing stock and public safety in the city, and that's

something I'm proud of."

But there are still problems ahead, FitzGerald said, the most pressing of which is the city's aging infrastructure.

"We have City Hall facilities and we have streets that are still in unacceptable levels of disrepair. That's a tough issue we haven't tackled yet, and it wasn't something I thought I could fix in four years," he said. "We need more money for infrastructure repairs. It's a long-term financial problem we haven't solved yet, and that's something the incoming mayor is going to have to deal with."

As he moves on to county government, FitzGerald said he will use many of the things he has learned working with Lakewood City Council, including an environment of openness and honesty. He hopes to upgrade the county's internal information technology system, just as he has at Lakewood City Hall. He also plans to hand out bonuses to county workers based on

merit, rather than length of employment, another procedure that has already been implemented in the city.

FitzGerald believes that while the city was at a tipping point when he arrived in the mayor's office, its recent success is indisputable. The city has recently begun to garner national attention from publications like *USA Today* and *Travel & Leisure Magazine*. But FitzGerald said Lakewood's success is also part of the reason he was elected to the county seat.

"A big part of what my platform was is that we ran the city properly and our economic strategy was working well in Lakewood," he said. "Our opponents didn't even try to take issue with that."

However, the city is not yet out of the woods, FitzGerald said, adding that the city is still in need of strong leadership to continue growth and improvement.

See more Lakewood news at cleveland.com/lakewood.