

St. Louis

Reviving the Spirit of St. Louis

An Interview with the Honorable
Francis G. Slay, Mayor, St. Louis

EDITORS' NOTE A St. Louis native, Francis Slay became the city's 45th mayor in 2001. A graduate of Quincy College in Illinois and Saint Louis University School of Law, he was previously an attorney with the firm of Guilfoil, Petzall & Shoemaker for 20 years, specializing in business law and commercial litigation.



Hon. Francis G. Slay

What made you decide to run for mayor?

I saw St. Louis falling behind other U.S. cities in terms of economic growth, job growth, and opportunities for rebuilding a strong downtown. There was a leadership vacuum in city government, and I was concerned that strategies to work with the private sector weren't being pursued aggressively enough. I had been a member of the city council for 16 years, and I thought the timing was right to move to the next level.

I knew we could do much better because we have so much potential. We're a centrally located city with good transportation infrastructure, outstanding institutions of higher learning, excellent hospitals, a large inventory of historic buildings, wonderful arts venues, sports and entertainment facilities, beautiful parks, and a rich heritage. We have what it takes to be a great city.

How did you prioritize what you wanted to accomplish?

Even before my campaign went into full swing, I met with people from all segments of the community to begin prioritizing those issues we needed to address to strengthen neighborhoods and improve the quality of life here. After talking with many people, I decided that, above all, we needed to reduce crime, improve our public-education system, and make sure the city government had more credibility. One important study found that one of the biggest impediments to doing business in St. Louis wasn't the earnings tax, crime, or anything else that readily comes to mind, but rather that city government wasn't sensitive to business issues or responsive

enough to the business community. We needed to make city government more accountable, more efficient, and more responsive to the people we serve: the people who live here, do business here, and visit our city.

With the help of a number of people in whom I had a lot of confidence, I put together what I called the Slay Action Plan. It outlined changes in every single facet of city government: health

care, human services, housing, education, crime, the business environment, technology, all the way down the line. The plan was aggressive but realistically achievable. We put it out there, before the community – on our Web site and in the press. The only criticism was that the goals were perhaps too ambitious. My response to that was: "We have a can-do attitude. If we don't achieve everything we're setting out to achieve in the Slay Action Plan, it won't be because we didn't try." My theme was: "We can be a great city again."

Since I've been in office, I've been very pleased with the progress we've made. We've achieved much more in the first three years of my term – in every area I just mentioned – than I expected.

You're very focused on the importance of neighborhoods.

Virtually everything we do is tied to improving the quality of life in neighborhoods. In order to do this, we've aggressively addressed violent crime, problem properties, nuisance crimes, and other irritants to law-abiding citizens, such as illegal trash dumping and litter in the streets. I'm proud to report that homicides have dropped about 50 percent over the past two years, which bucked the national trend, and we're now at a 41-year low. Crime is significantly down in every other major category. Property values are up as much as 30 percent and more in some areas, and there is investment and development in areas that haven't seen it in decades.

You mentioned the need to work more closely with the private sector.

How do you involve business leaders in your efforts to improve St. Louis?

There has been, just in the past few years, a greater recognition of how important the city of St. Louis is to the economic future of our entire region, and we're benefiting from that. Thus, we've been very successful in coordinating the efforts of various civic and business organizations in the St. Louis area to improve opportunities in the city. These include Civic Progress, which is an organization of the 30-plus largest corporations in St. Louis; the Regional Business Council, with its membership of close to 100 mid-cap companies; St. Louis 2004; the Downtown St. Louis Partnership; the Danforth Foundation, which has been very active here; the Regional Chamber and Growth Association; and many others. We've coordinated their efforts, as I said, to get them all on the same page, and this has resulted in greater involvement on their part. Now, there's real synergy between city government and the private sector, which was virtually non-existent previously. Also, as mayor, I've tried to be a catalyst in attracting outside resources to help us with budgetary problems. For example, half my technology director's salary was paid by the business community.

Can you ever step back and appreciate your success, or are you constantly raising the bar?

Celebrating success is very important. It helps sustain the effort. At the same time, we're constantly raising the bar and accepting new challenges. You can't just rest on your laurels and say, "We did a good job on this one." We're involved in too many things. We're responsible for everything from the water department to the airport, sewer system, health department, streets, and education. Some of these may not be under my direct control, like the schools and the sewer system, but people want to know what the mayor's doing to improve them. And there are ongoing issues concerning the homeless, young children, and programs for the disabled and low-income individuals. There are always improvements to be made. The job is never done. ●