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Strike the Spike, delivered at the Grooter's Event on October 4, 1999

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Strike the Spike -- Grooter's Event
Monday, October 4, 1999

I am not Bob Grooters. I am Don Lubbers. Bob is the "Chief Determinator" of this event. I might be described by the late Spiro Agnew, former Vice President of the United States as the "Chief Egghead" of the local State university. You may ask "Why would Bob invite me to speak and preside at his event?" Bob says it is not in his job description to do these things, but it is in mine. I don't argue with Bob. I do what he tells me. There is a characteristic both of us share that may have influenced him to invite me to do this work today. We are visionaries. We like to perceive a future and make it a reality. Today we celebrate a Bob Grooter's vision passing over into reality.

We are here on a day that is on the cusp of a season change. We know that summer is ending and fall beginning. And we know that winter and spring follow. Nature in our part of the world works in a similar pattern year after year. We accept seasons and live accordingly. We cannot forget the rhythms of nature, but we often overlook the less predictable rhythms for our social and economic institutions. They exist nonetheless. A city is a social and economic institution. So is a region. They have a rhythm that we can effect unlike our inability to alter the seasons. Yet a city will change as inevitably as the snow will fall. How it will reinvent itself is up to the citizens who live in and around it. There is an old proverb that states "City gates stand open to bad as well as the good." The citizens have choices. Today we recognize a good choice for our city.

Have you ever seen a dead city? The most vivid memory for me comes from India. It's eerie to walk through a vacant city, still standing, that once had 100,000 people milling in its streets and plazas. I think, too, of cities I have visited in the northeast section of our country that

at one time were equal in population to Grand Rapids, but now are hardly more than declining towns. "The city gates stand open to bad as well as good," and some bad choices were made by people in those towns.

Do you who are of my generation get a thrill every time you go to Chicago? My thrill comes from knowing what Chicago was like in the 1940's, and seeing it today. Even through the endemic corruption that exists in large cities Chicago reinvented itself. When the rhythm of decline had set in the leadership both economic and political asserted itself and ever since it has been upbeat. In one of his poems Walt Whitman writes "The great city is that which has the greatest men and women." The motto of our State is "Si quaeris peninsulam amoenam, circumspice." "If you seek a pleasant peninsula, look about you." No motto could be more appropriate for those of us who live in west Michigan. In our particular triangle from Holland to Grand Haven and Muskegon to Grand Rapids and surrounding cities and towns the light shines brightly, and today that light is focused on a railroad yard where new economic life is abounding. The great man theory is at work here. Bob had the vision, the patience, the ability to work through detail, and the capacity to put together the capital. But Bob will also admit that this is not a solo performance.

We have learned that dependency on government does not work. We have learned that over-intrusive government stifles economic initiatives. We have also learned that private enterprise is enhanced by good government leadership and policies. In nearly forty years as a college and university President I have observed seven governors, most of them competent administrators and politicians. Our present governor, here present, John Engler, has the clearest vision of what Michigan must have and do to make the state motto come true in the 21st Century.

He is also the most successful at transforming concepts into policies and action. He is here because one of his initiatives made this event possible.

The Mayor of Grand Rapids, John Logie, is here. We have all observed his landslide election for a third four-year term. He leads and represents the people as Grand Rapids successfully reinvents itself. As you drive the streets of the City you know something good is happening because you often cannot find your way from point A to point B through the maze of construction. These two leaders are the principals for the government side in this transaction that we celebrate today.

We who use the English language have appropriated a word from the French, that symbolizes rebirth, *RENAISSANCE*, a beautiful word to the ear, and an uplifting thought to the mind. In the often rough world of politics it is encouraging that the term Renaissance Zone emerged to describe those places in our cities on the rhythmic downbeat that government will make available on favorable terms for the investment of private capital. New jobs, new or retained enterprises and a rebirth for part of the City, a rhythmic swing.

I came across a quote from a man named L.N. Bower that struck me as unusual and especially appropriate for this occasion. He said "It may almost be held that the hope for commercial gain has done nearly as much for the cause of truth as even the love of truth itself." Well, its true that employment is happier than unemployment. It is true that more productive jobs are better than fewer. It is true that people are happier when they are productive and earning a good living. It is true that it takes investors and leaders to make this all happen. To make all this come true Bob Grooters is taking the plunge. He is doing it with style. Look at the architecture, for this industrial building, with its railroad station look, appropriately fitting for this site. In the scriptures it says, "Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly and whoever

sows generously will also reap generously.” Bob is not sowing sparingly in this project and we recognize that the citizens of Michigan, through the Renaissance Zone legislation, are not sowing sparingly either so lets hope that there will be a generous harvest for all.

Though Bob deferred opening remarks to me he, needs to say something to us and to introduce the Governor. Henry Ford once said “Whether you think you can or that you can’t, you are usually right.” I present to you the man who thinks he can, Bob Grooters.

Logie Introduction

This, I am sure, is one of the Mayor's happy days. He goes to many meetings and public functions of all kinds. When he can attend one that means jobs in the City, that brings to his face the broadest of smiles. John Logie likes his job and the people of Grand Rapids like him in it. They reelect him by large majorities. I think they do that because they believe he has a vision for the City and he knows how to translate that vision into reality. He knows how to bring about public-private partnerships like the one that brings us here today. I present to you the Honorable John Logie, Mayor of Grand Rapids.

Higgenbotham Introduction

This must be a great event for the people at Norfolk Southern Corporation. Today appears to be a winner for them. Property that is no longer needed for railway operations will become a productive industrial center, and a productive industrial center can provide a need for existing rail services. Norfolk Southern Corporation is the third party in this renaissance. Mr. Marc Higgenbotham, Vice President of Public Affairs for Norfolk Southern, represents the Corporation at our event today and he will now tell us about developments at his company and the company's participation in this Renaissance Zone project.

Strike the Spike

There is a monument at Promontory, Utah where it is claimed the first golden spike was struck joining tracks from the east and west in the first transcontinental railroad. There were big celebrations across the land as the telegraph let Americans know they could now travel the rails across the nation. There were more spikes of gold and silver and other metals commemorating this event. Railroads and golden spikes since that time celebrate important railroad events. Today we celebrate a new Union Station, of Industry in an old railroad yard. Its time to bring out the spikes and pound our way into a new era in Grand Rapids. If you talked on this program you have qualified yourself to be a spike striker. So, on behalf of Bob Grooters, I invite Governor Engler, Mayor Logie and Vice President Higgenbotham to join Bob and me to strike the Renaissance spike.