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ACCEPTANCE SPEECH OF NLC PRESIDENT TED ELLIS

These are interesting times, aren't they? Times when history is bending. Nowhere is this more evident than in our cities, towns and villages.

One summer day in 1891, Mayor Martin Walbert boarded a train car and set out on what would be the better part of a day's journey out of town.

History was bending then, too.

As Martin left the city, he must have wondered what the future would hold for his community.

Abroad, the European economy was weak and already in a recession. The U.S. was less than two years from its deepest-ever depression.

At home, the public was clamoring for an end to the open ditch carrying human and animal waste along the south side of his city and into a major river. They demanded that new streets be constructed to replace the muddy ones, but their demands exceeded their ability to finance the repairs.

Martin's successor would bluntly describe the city's finances

as follows: "The city treasurer files his final report, (showing)...the general fund overdrawn. This of course is occasioned by the extensive street improvements... and when we consider the extent of these improvements we are only surprised that the treasury is in as good condition as it now is."

The citizenry was still restless over the immigrants – the Germans – who did not speak the language and yet, they said, took jobs away from the locals. And the Irish – who had their own brand of English – were reputed to drink, avoid work and take advantage of law-abiding citizens.

Then there was the *crime* problem.

In those days when communication was slow at best, horse thieves and swindlers found it easy to slither into the city, commit their criminal acts, and blow town. Maybe there was a shyster or two on this very train with the mayor.

In a rare quiet moment as the train tracks clacked beneath him, it is not difficult to know what Martin was feeling because we have all been in the same place: seemingly insurmountable problems; not enough money to fix them; and constituents demanding more than they are willing to pay for.

No doubt he sometimes questioned why he ran for office to begin with.

It was the need to share information with other mayors from other cities that took Martin out of town that day. Ten other mayors would join him in this first such meeting of mayors in the US – the very first recorded state league meeting.

Elsewhere in the United States, officials were seeking one another out for similar reasons. Soon, other state leagues began forming. In the 1920's, his state league joined others to form a "league of state leagues" – which eventually became the National League of Cities.

Bluffton, Indiana Mayor Martin Walbert could not have known how his train trip that day would take him to the genesis of an organization that would one day affect millions of Americans living in cities.

He could not have known that 120 years later, we would still be dealing with environmental, transportation, immigration and funding issues at the local level.

He *did* know, however, that his and other communities faced problems and opportunities that transcended city or state boundaries; and that sharing ideas and information was the best strategy for dealing with those issues.

They also knew that by speaking with one loud voice they could make things happen. (One of their first big lobbying successes was obtaining free use of the newfangled telephone service for police and city business, including league business.)

No doubt there was reluctance from his community to consider new approaches to persistent problems; but, for Martin Walbert, it was the difference between solution and stagnation.

Such is our challenge today. The world has changed significantly in the last 30 - 10 - even 5 years. And the very way we think about things is changing.

A century later, all of us find ourselves with challenges that are centered on some familiar themes.

For Martin, the problem was old: criminal behavior, with the escape of the criminal made easier by the advent of the railroad.

Whereas the conventional remedy would have been to run the criminal down on horseback, when they looked at the problem in a different way – not how do we catch him from behind, but how do we get ahead of him – the solution (the telephone!) became obvious.

The solution was a collaborative effort of city officials daring to think differently.

For example, the next time you visit a first-grade classroom, look around. Note how different it looks from when you were small enough to fit behind one of those little desks.

Those children are learning and processing information differently than their parents or grandparents. It is much more than the technology they use. It is that succeeding generations *think* differently than their predecessors.

These 6-year olds, like my grandchildren Curtis and Ella, have never heard a busy signal on a telephone. They speak a different language than Poppa. They don't understand when I say something sounds like a broken record. They will never be told by a teacher: "If you don't know how to spell a word, look it up in the dictionary."

A few years ago, little Curtis picked up a cassette tape and thought it was a camera....but he can operate a smart phone better than most of us here.

These differences do not belong to the very young alone.

As the National League of Cities, we are called to prepare the next generation – and the next generation of elected officials – for the uncharted roads that lie before them.

How do we do it?

We do it by acknowledging *who* we are.

We are the nation's oldest and largest organization of cities. And living in our cities are lots of people whom many still consider "young."

In fact, the median age in the United States is 36. That means that half of the people whom we serve are younger than 36. The youngest of the baby-boomers is 47.

Many of the officials elected on Tuesday and most of our constituents process information in ways different from their parents.

If the National League of Cities is to remain the “go-to” authority on cities, we must – especially in these times – clearly understand what information our new generation needs and how best to deliver it.

We also must clearly decide *where* we are going.

Like Martin Walbert: not chasing solutions on horseback, but by using every resource at hand to look at our challenges in new ways.

Our focus must extend – not to the next election – but to the next generation.

All the while, we must remember that some challenges are immediate. With our eyes firmly fixed on the horizon, we need to keep our feet on the ground.

We are called to speak the truth to power in Washington and be a constant and determined advocate for all generations.

How we do that is best exemplified by another Bluffton,

Indiana boy.

About the same time and just blocks from the station where Martin Walbert boarded the train, Lewis Scott and his wife were starting a family.

They named their baby boy Lewis Everett Scott, after his father, but they called him "Everett."

As a kid growing up, Everett just wanted to play baseball. When the scrawny kid graduated from high school in 1909, the Red Sox and later the Yankees took a chance on him.

It was an era when players regularly sharpened the spikes on their shoes and were not afraid to use them to cut into the legs of middle infielders when sliding into a base.

Over his career, Everett endured the punishment of playing with injury. He played shortstop well, however. And he was there every day – even when his legs bore deep cuts and once when an eye injury almost rendered him blind.

He was there – contributing to the team's work for a record 1,307 consecutive games that included 27 World Series games.

That record would only be broken by Lou Gehrig and then by Cal Ripken, Jr. Everett Scott still holds the third spot on the all-time list of consecutive games played.

Many days, Everett must have limped onto the field wondering why he played a game...where the next batter could hit a line drive speeding toward your head...or where base runners with sharpened spikes came at you trying to take you out of the game...and where you're expected to shake it all off and be ready for the next play.

Not one of us needs reminding that the coming year will be filled with lots of posturing and rhetoric on the federal level during the Presidential election.

Even while campaign rhetoric rages, we need to remind *our* federal officials that there is serious work to be done, so that we can begin to bring prosperity back to our cities and the people we are called to serve.

Most of us in public life will find ourselves in the midst of campaign hysteria in 2012. When it gets crazy out there, we need to go to the refrigerator and read the instructions on the jar of mayonnaise: "Keep Cool - Do Not Freeze."

But keeping our cool does not mean we won't bear down.

The National League of Cities is staffed by great and talented people who give it their best every day to gather knowledge and information about today's challenges.

But when baseball games are to be won, you don't send the team trainer up to bat. You don't ask the equipment manager to pinch-run or the third-base coach to play third

base.

You see, it's staff's job to provide us with all the tools and information, but it's up to us – one "at bat" at a time — because:

We *know* how to take a high hard line drive and still throw the runner out.

We *know* what it's like to have someone come at you spikes up, sometimes cutting into your person, and still be ready for the next play.

We *know* what it's like to lace up your shoes and run onto the field even when you're injured and don't feel like playing.

One more thing, Babe Ruth and Everett Scott roomed together for five years on the road. It mattered little how many home runs Babe Ruth hit in a game unless Everett Scott was in the infield, throwing opposing runners out one by one, day in and day out.

When other elected officials need us for ideas, experience, or support, we must be there. When members of Congress need to hear that phone call or contact from home, we must be there, even when we would rather have spent the few minutes in a quiet corner.

We spoke about that first-grade classroom that looks very

different today than it did decades ago; however, there is one thing that is the same: The wide-eyed expressions of wonder and hope on the faces of the six-year-olds sitting there.

And who - in what will seem like an instant – will be leading the cities and towns that we hold so dearly.

We owe them cities, towns and villages of opportunity, leadership and good governance.

We will do it – not with our Babe Ruth-style home runs, but with our Everett Scott-style tenacity.

Robert Kennedy reminded us that: “Few will have the greatness to bend history itself; but each of us can work to change a small portion of events and in the total of all those acts will be written the history of this generation.”

Thank you.

Now, let's get to work.