

Oral History Interview Transcript

Mike Houston, Narrator

Pam Springer, Transcriber

12-6-2006

## Table of Contents

1. Title Page
2. Introduction to transcript
3. Narrator's background
4. Narrator's schooling
5. Employment before becoming mayor
6. First term election
7. First term legislation
8. Second term election
9. Second term legislation
10. Revitalizing downtown
11. Representation lawsuit
12. Work after being mayor
13. Running for other offices
14. Failures and accomplishments as mayor\
15. Final thanks
16. Bibliography
17. Footnotes

## Introduction to transcript

The following is a transcript of two interviews conducted with the former mayor of Springfield, Michael Houston. He was Mayor from 1979, to 1987. His background including schooling and work before becoming Mayor, and his two terms as mayor are discussed. Including various programs and attempts to better Springfield that were undertaken during his two terms. Then the interviews move in to what he did after his time as mayor. We discussed what work he did and for whom, and what other offices he attempted to run for since his time as Mayor. These were the major topics discussed in the two interviews that make up this transcript.

I am the interviewer Pam Springer. And these two interviews were my first experience with oral history. I am a graduate student working towards my master's degree in history at the University of Illinois at Springfield. These two interviews were undertaken as the major requirement for my oral history class.

This transcript consists of two interviews conducted with Michael Houston on October 18, and I interviewed him again on October 31, 2006. However, it should be pointed out that both the consent form and the first tape say the date was October 19th. This was a mistake on both the part of Houston and me. Both interviews were conducted in Houston's office at Town and Country Bank in Springfield. We sat at a table in his office across from each other with the tape recorder between us. Also behind Houston there was a large window and so the office had plenty of light. The office was very

suitable for the interview because for the most part it was quiet and Houston felt comfortable there. During the first interview his phone began to ring and this can be heard on the tape. Now that you know what the conditions and time of the interview were like, I will now move on to my method for transcribing the interviews.

As I said these were my first interviews for an oral history project, and this is my first transcript. As a result of these factors I will transcribe everything on the tapes. This includes Um, ah, etc. Even cases where I am trying to ask Houston a follow up question and there is no opportunity, because he did not pause during his answers very much and I did not want to interrupt his train of thought. Also I should note that during these interviews I had a hard time phrasing the questions in a coherent way. I will not alter my questions to make them more readable unless the words make no sense at all, then I will rewrite the question so it makes sense. Though Houston's answers will make it clear to the reader what the questions were. The first letter of each new thought will be capitalized and ended with a period. So I will treat each thought like a sentence even though some of the conversation might be in fragments. Though in this introduction I used names, once I get to the transcript I will use interviewer and narrator. These terms I feel are clearer than Q and A. Also for anything like the phone ringing or laughter I will put these things in brackets. A note on the tapes the first part of the first interview is actually on side B of tape one even though I say side one on the tape. The second tape is fine.

A few words about editing. I have spell checked the document and checked with Houston for the spelling of names Any misspellings that are left are not intentional but

what either Houston or I said. In short I made the transcript readable in places but still tried to keep it verbatim. Now lets move on to the transcript itself.

Interviewer:

This is interview one with Mike Houston On the uh nineteenth of October. [the date was actually the 18<sup>th</sup> of October.] I'm the interviewer Pam Springer. Mike Houston is the Narrator. We're doing this at his office at town and country bank. [After this the tape is stopped and restarted.]

Interviewer:

Okay first question. Uh. Can you just give me a little about your background? Where you grew up? Were born? Your schooling? Your college education? That sort of thing?

Narrator:

Basically I consider myself a native of of Springfield. Although I was not born uh in in Springfield. I happened to be born in 1944, which was during World War II. And while the Houston family originally came to Sangamon County in 1824. My father was serving in the navy and his port at that time was Norfolk, Virginia. Excuse me, my dad's port at that time was Boston. And my mother was was living in Boston. So I was was born in Boston. We returned to Springfield at after World War uh II. I grew up uh here in the city of Springfield, went to Cathedral Grade School. From Cathedral Kindergarten through eighth grade. Spent one year at the old Cathedral high school. And then was in the first group of students that moved into what was then Griffin High School. At the

time that that it opened, I graduated from Griffin High School. I attended one year at what was Springfield Junior College and then transferred to Illinois State University. Graduated from Illinois State University with a Bachelor of Science Degree, with a major in business administration. Later in about 1994, I picked up an MBA from the University of Illinois over at Urbana-Champaign. Just sort of to complete my education and sort of get myself up to date with. What was happening that was new in education and business.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Interviewer:

Then what kind of like what kind of positions and employment did you hold prior to becoming mayor? I mean I know you worked at various companies and was president of I believe the Hurricane Fence Company for awhile?

Narrator:

I had worked at a couple of different different companies when I graduated from Illinois State University. I took a job with a company called the Higbee Company, which is Higbee. [Higbee is spelled out here] The Higbee Company was located in Cleveland, Ohio. Ah at that time it was a large independent department store. While I was growing up, had been involved working with with grocery stores here in Springfield. The Avenue Food Shop and what was Steinberg Baum grocery store. After I got out of high school, I had worked for K-Mart at the time that it opened in Springfield. And I really worked for K-Mart through the time that I was in college. I wanted to go into retailing but wanted to do that in what I would consider to be a fashion department store. So I ended up moving to Cleveland, Ohio, and going in to a management training program um with them. The

Higbee Company is no longer in existence. At one time it was the largest independent department store in the country. At the time I went to work for them, they probably had about 5,000 employees. And the management training program that I was in probably had about 500 people that were in the program. I spent a couple of years with them. Was involved in different areas starting in a toy department, moving to an area called notions. Moving from there into boys clothing. From there I went in to misses sportswear and from misses sportswear I went over to men's clothing. So that I had a background in terms of different aspects of the various areas of the department store. I worked for them for about two years and then joined a company called Cole National Corporation, which is also based in Cleveland, Ohio. Cole National is again a company that has been merged out of business. At the time I worked for them, it was an American stock exchange company. Eventually became a New York stock exchange company. And among other things they had operated all the key departments in Sears and Montgomery Wards, as well as all the optical departments within Sears and Montgomery Wards. They had basically built their business making and selling keys. And it was a very profitable business while they were the world's largest optical retailer. They actually made more money selling keys than all the eye glasses that they sold. But the business that they had made that money on was disappearing. I went to work for them when they had something that today is called Things Remembered. Was an experiment. [ Phone rings several times in background.] I eventually ended up as the general manager of that. We were opening up units across the country and into Canada. It gave me the idea that I really wanted to go into business for myself. I traveled across the country I was constantly looking for a business that I might be able to buy or get

into. And when I was home visiting my parents in uh Christmas of 1970, there was a blind add for a business for sale in Springfield. I had contacted the agent that that had the business. They said that they had a chain link fence company. My response was, "What is chain length fence?" [interviewer laughs at this question] And I ended up buying the company. Not based on what it was but based on what I thought the potential was for the company with me managing it and being able to take it and to grow it. So basically my background had been management. From the day I came out of college and it was part of that and was retail oriented and part of it dealt in the contracting business.

Interviewer:

So would you say you had mostly a management background with a bit of maybe entrepreneurial I guess business sort of thrown in there?

Narrator:

Well but yes right. I mean that's the idea was that what I was doing for Cole National was in much the being in business for yourself. The only thing was that the board decided how much money I was going to get each year which would determine how many units we were going be able to open. But it was very much like operating your own small business. And I took what was basically that they had been working with for a couple years. That was an experiment that they had not been able to refine, came in refined it and doubled the size of the number of units we had in the first six months. That I was with them we opened two units which brought us to about sixteen units. In the next six months we opened sixteen units and went back closing some of the original units.

Refined the business, got it going, and today that business has I'm not sure how many units but somewhere in excess of twelve hundred across the country. And a lot of that was done on my ideas as well as my blood and sweat. As we were doing these things, yet I get no remuneration from it.. You know I really wanted to get into something where as if I was working hard it was not just a matter of running it but that I was going to get the rewards of doing it from a financial uh point of view.

Interviewer:

Alright, let's move on I guess to your first term as Mayor and the elections. How did that. How did you running for mayor and how did all that come about?

Narrator:

Basically what had happened, I was elected in April 1979. I had actually been approached by some people in the night before the 1975 election and it was suggested that I might want to run for the Mayor.

Interviewer:

But you didn't run then.

Narrator:

I did not run then. I was not at the point with my business where I could just walk away from it. And had really never given any thought to doing that but I had finished a term as president of the JCS. And while I was president of the JCS what we tried to do was take on not only the projects that we normally did on a year to year basis and that I had basically been in charge of the year before when I was the vice president in charge of civic programming. So that when I was. The following year when I was President of JCS generally does the same projects year after year. We decided that we would take on a

couple new projects. Those would be problems facing the city of Springfield. And the basic problem we had at the time which still exists today, is our educational system which at the high school level was on a double shift. And the only thing we saw that we could do to try to help them was to raise money. And we eventually went to the school superintendent and the school board and suggested that they do a referendum. That if they would do the referendum, we would run it. We ran two referendums and the laws were different then in terms of how you did school board elections and referendums. And basically we ran the first two, but I was involved in four referendums.

Interviewer:

Were these for like. Tax. Were these for tax increases?

Narrator:

That's correct. They were two part referendums. The first three were to both build schools as well as to increase the funding. The fourth one that. And there were four referendums within a twelve month period. The fourth one we abandoned the buildings and just went for rate increases in the educational fund as well as the operation and maintenance funds. That fourth referendum did in fact pass once we done that. One of the guys who was in the JCS with me decided that he was going to run for the School Board. And he had approached me because I knew more probably about the school district and the operation of the school district than anybody who wasn't involved in the administration or on the school board. And asked if I'd run his campaign. I basically said if he was dumb enough to do that I'd be happy to help him but I certainly wouldn't

encourage him to do that. He ended up running for the school board. At that time there were two seats up. The incumbent school board president beat him by seventeen votes in for the second spot in that election. And the following year I anticipated he would run for the school board again but he ended up running on partisan office and I ran that campaign. Along the way got involved in some other partisan campaigns –specifically the one for John Davidson who was the state senator, who was also a past president of the JCS. J. David Jones who was a state representative who was also. . . Who was another former president of the Springfield JCS. And along the way got involved in the Chamber of Commerce. I looked at what was happening in that 1975 race which had. [ Popping sound may be tape or background noise.] A former Mayor by the name of Nelson Howarth who was actually served three terms and had retired and then had come back four years later to run against William Telford who was the incumbent mayor. And basically in 1975 election, it became strictly personalities no one was uh talking about uh.

Interviewer:

So there were. . .

Narrator:

Any of the issues or what they were going to do for city government and [Narrator pauses for a couple seconds.] I said after the election that you know I don't know that I could have gotten into the race but certainly if I've gotten into the race it would have been a different type of of race dealing with issues and things facing the city of Springfield. Between 1975 and 1979 I had become involved on the board of the Chamber of Commerce and got involved in terms of economic development. City government was

not involved in that process at all at that time other than to contribute some money to the economic development council which at that time was called the Industrial Development Council cause the term economic development wasn't even being used. And at the uh time that I announced that I was going to to run for Mayor in late 1978, the day before that I resigned from a position that was then called the vice president elect of the Chamber of commerce to get into the race. But basically the reason that I got into the race was I didn't like what was going on in the city of Springfield at that time. I didn't like the way that city government was operating. I thought that city government needed to get involved in the economic development process. To make things happen within the community. And I also thought that it would be a job that I would enjoy. Be able to wrap myself up into. I had come to the point at that point where I was almost bored with my business and ready to do something else after having run it for eight years. And decided to go ahead and jump in with both feet. [Interviewer chuckles at this.]

Interviewer:

Now in the primary I believe you had five others. There were five other opponents beside yourself in the primary?

Narrator:

There were. There were a total of five candidates.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Narrator:

Uh in the race.

Interviewer:

Was this the primary or the general election?

Narrator:

Well the way the...

Interviewer:

Yes.

Narrator:

The primaries operated. [Interviewer coughs loudly and noticeably.] It's a nonpartisan primary. There were five people that filed uh in the primary. You go through the primary and then after the primary the top two finishers go against each other six weeks later.

[Interviewer clicks tongue loudly.] In an April general election. The primary is generally in February and the general is beginning of April.

Interviewer:

Do you recall who your opponent was?

Narrator:

Well my primary uh in terms of the general election was a gentlemen by the name of Frank Madonia. And Frank Madonia had been on the city council for a number of years. This was quite a nonpartisan election. And actually what happened was both the democratic and republican parties backed Frank Madonia. During the course of the election he received every endorsement that was out there whether it was from the labor unions or anybody that was doing an endorsement endorsed him.

Interviewer:

So he.

Narrator:

Uh.

Interviewer:

He was. He was obviously the favorite candidate. [ Popping noise in background from the tape.]

Narrator:

He was obviously the favorite candidate. I remember the newspaper endorsed him although the endorsement that he got was a fairly mild endorsement. In that the endorsement while it endorsed him, it was not a glowing type of endorsement and they indicated that either candidate would do a good job as as mayor of the city. Which is as much as I could hope for at the time. In those days a political campaign didn't cost the kind of money that it cost today. But at the first reporting period Frank had raised \$96,000. I had raised \$23,000. And that was basically through the primary, that you were filing for. And so was not only a matter that he had all the endorsements, had both political parties, but he also had all the money to run a campaign. In fact I remember I had one small group that was going to give me an endorsement at the tail end of the race and I said please, whatever you do, don't endorse me because I will no longer be able to say that I'm not endorsed by anyone.

Interviewer:

So would you say you were the underdog in this particular campaign?

Narrator:

Oh, I think on the election day, other than myself, I don't think that there was anybody that that believed that I was going to win?

Interviewer:

Were you surprised when you did win? Or was.

Narrator:

That morning we had given the press what we thought would be the winning percent. As it turned out, it happened to be within percentage points, less than, when I say, less than one percent, of what we said it would be. We won by a little over five point something 5.2, 5.3 and we were, and I said it was going to be a 5 point something. And we were a couple of points off. But it was enough to make believers out of the press. [Interviewer laughs]

Interviewer:

Now, OK, now I have some materials here [interviewer looks through papers] here, let's see what's this first one here? [hands Narrator papers to look at]

Interviewer: What is the title?

Narrator:

OK, The League of women Voters of Springfield. It looks like this here is some type of questionnaire.

Interviewer:

I believe they asked you that.

Narrator:

You want? [Interviewer hands paper back to narrator]

Interviewer:

The reason that I brought this up is because you had various goals or priorities you wanted you wanted to bring industry into the city? More general involvement as you said? And you also said you wanted to like [interviewer pauses and looks at notes.] professionalize the police force I believe you said?

Narrator:

Ahum.

Interviewer:

Why do you think these particular goals were important and in your first term how did you go about accomplishing these?

Narrator:

Well basically one of the things that that we did is that. [ Narrator pauses to think.] The campaign that we ran, we didn't have money. I mean we didn't. We had some money but compared to the opponent that we had. Well, in the primary, we had four opponents. The thing was that you have to get through the primary to be able to face off in the general election.

We didn't have a lot of money but one of the things that we had done was to sit down and to identify specific issues and I had gone out and did a lot of walking of precincts – banging on doors – meeting people and that type of thing. And what we did is that we started off early on doing weekly press conferences. And when we would do a weekly press conference, what we would do is take one issue and then we would take a number of points in terms of what we would do on that issue and then go through those points. So that as we worked our way through this, eventually what we ended up with was a platform. The very first press conference that we did was on economic development and

as it turned out, I am going from memory, and don't hold me to this, but I think that what we did, was that we identified nine different points in terms of economic developments – things that we would do if I was elected. And we presented those to the press and went through each of the nine and then every week after that I took another subject and did the same thing. And for whatever reason if it was nine points which I happen to think it was a nine point program that we ended up with on the first press conference, well then every press conference that followed sort of had nine points to it. And so what we tried to do is when we threw out an area, whether it was economic development or whether it was the police department, what we did was we laid out not just one item that we were going to do, we laid out a program of things that we would do within that area. And basically this was as a result of number one identifying what we thought the problems were, but it was also a matter that these were the ideas that we had come up with as to what we were going to do if I was elected in terms of implementing the programs so that during the course of the campaign uh we did that during the primary. After the primary we didn't do a press conference for one or two weeks and then we started up again and did an issue an week for the balance of the time and we identified what we thought the areas where we had problems in the city where we could do a better job than what had been done, but most importantly offered the general public an outline as to what I would do as major of the city of Springfield.

Interviewer:

Now the problem with the police department, what caused that to be an issue? Do you remember?

Narrator:

The in terms of the police department, when we talk in terms of the problems, the problems of the police department, those were a lot different problems than what we have in the city of Springfield today. The, what we dealt with was the crime issue. We talked in terms of putting more manpower on the streets of the city of Springfield. We talked in terms of removing administrative people within the police department and putting those people out on the streets as officers. We talked in terms of adding police officers in each of the years that I would be in office. We talked in terms of implementing a take home car program, which still exists today, with the idea that when an officer was in his take home car that he would have his police radio on, that he would be armed, and that he would respond to calls and just having the visibility of the police cars out and throughout the community would have an impact on crime. We talked in terms of doing the crime prevention and neighborhood watch types of programs so that we talk in terms of presenting a program, we talk in terms not so much of the fact that there were the problems in the police department as how we would improve the police department's operation, the management of that department.

Interviewer:

So it was an issue of management, manpower and issues of that nature?

Narrator:

It, right, and it was a matter of, at a time when crime was increasing, what were we going to do to provide a better police protection and we outlined ways that both involved additional expenditures and as well as ways of basically using the resources that were there and using those resources better.

Interviewer:

Was the police department open to these new ideas or did you have to sort of push and prod them?

Narrator:

The police department, to a degree, was open to some of the ideas and in some cases it was a matter of pushing and prodding. It was a matter of putting through a new management structure within the police department. We went ahead and basically put in a management structure where there was some one twenty-four hours day, seven days a week, was in charge of the department. At that particular time who was answerable ultimately to me. And who could be removed from their position if they were not functioning. They did not hold civil service positions. These were appointed positions, and some of those things may have gone over better with members of the police department than others. But the reality is, I think that if you talk to people who were police officers during the time that I was in office they will indicate that I'm still the best mayor for the police department that they ever had.

[interviewer chuckles and tape stops.]

Interviewer:

And we are continuing the interview with Mike Houston.

Interviewer:

Another one of your goals I guess was to bring, as some of my research I came across, a business approach to the to city government. What did you mean by that and how did you go about that?

Narrator:

Well, basically and again you have to sort of go back to what the times were with the previous city council. And at that time the city council meetings were broadcast live on the radio. And those meetings were held on a Tuesday morning. And a lot of people listened to those for entertainment because of what was going on and generally by the time you went out for lunch on Tuesday, the topic of conversation was whatever was going on at the city council that day. The council meetings were somewhat disruptive. There wasn't a lot being done. There was a lot of disagreement between the five members of the city council at that time. And as I talk in terms of bringing a business approach to the city government what I talk about was first of all conducting the business of city government in a business-like manner, that the uh meetings would no longer be a laughing stock within the city, that we would have some decorum during those meetings. But most importantly that we would get something accomplished in moving the city forward. as I talk in terms of taking a business approach to the operation of city government, my approach was that we would do things simply because they made good since to do things that you were not necessarily operating in a political type of environment and that we would try to get the most out of the taxpayer's dollars that that we could do.

Interviewer:

So the city government I guess was not very efficient and it, the business of the city, was not moving forward or done efficiently?

Narrator:

In my opinion that the city council prior to the time that I came into office was not conducting themselves in a manner that I thought they should and I thought that there

were a lot better ways to approach what was being done on a daily basis in terms of the operation of city government.

Interviewer:

You also wanted to increase industry within the city and you had a role, I believe, changing or creating what is now the business, the Bureau of Tourism I believe.

Narrator:

In terms of the uh Convention of Visitors Bureau and at that time it was called the when I went into the office they had what was called the Convention and Tourism Commission. While they had quote, unquote, a Convention and Tourism Commission it did not have a full time employee. It did have an executive director who was a contractual part time employee and if I recall correctly, that person had run a public relations firm on a full time basis and had a number of part time employees but again there was no what I saw as an organized professional effort to promote convention and visitors to Springfield. That was in fact, one of the points of my nine point economic development program was to deal with the convention and visitors business. And what we went about doing was, first of all, hiring a professional executive director who was Fred Puglia who at the time was working in Providence, Rhode Island, and, we brought Fred to the city of Springfield and began to put together a full time professional office that actually went out and promoted bringing convention and as well as visitors to Springfield. During that process we did change the name of it from what was then called the Convention and Tourist Commission to the Convention and Visitors Bureau and what took what basically was one of the assets and opportunities of the city of Springfield and promoted the community and brought business into the city. We really at that point developed the theme of Mr. Lincoln's

hometown and I think that probably on a long term basis it had a major impact on the dollars that had flowed in a direct result of that. I think probably by the time that I left office the Convention and Visitors probably had a staff of 10 to 12 people on a full time type of basis and probably had gone from a budget of maybe \$50,000 to somewhere in the area of \$400,000 or \$500,000. But again I am going off of memory and we're talking about something that I left twenty years ago. So I'm not sure how good my memory is.

Interviewer:

Would you say then that you sort of helped Springfield become the tourist Mecca it is today? [slight laughter from the interviewer.]

Narrator:

Well, we certainly took Springfield and took the opportunity in the asset that we had in Mr. Lincoln. And promoted it. And worked it. and went out and solicited businesses and conventions to come to the city of Springfield long before anybody else was doing that type of type of thing which is very common place today. At the time we were doing that there was really nobody in the state of Illinois other than the city of Chicago that was doing that. And there really were very few convention and visitors bureaus across the country. Even in your major uh cities.

Interviewer:

[Interviewer pauses to think.] Would you say that you accomplished a lot your first term in office?

Narrator:

Oh I think that we made a lot of progress. I think that in my mind, of course that's only my mind so that probably that's not an unbiased opinion. That that we did make a lot of

progress during my first term in office and that we really changed the way city government was operating, that it was more professional type of city government. This was also a time when we moved into a period of a recession and had major unemployment in the city of Springfield. Interest rates were extremely high. And from an economic point of view this was not a good time to be in city government or any government for that matter because you were in a period of extremely high inflation. At a time when there wasn't enough revenue growth and maintaining the finances of city government and trying to operate in the black which the city of Springfield was required to do was a very difficult task.

Interviewer:

Okay let's move on to your second term now. Were you more confident during the second election than you were in the first?

Narrator:

I was very confident in terms of that I would do well in terms of the second election. I won the second election with somewhere in the area of sixty one, sixty two, sixty three, percent with something over sixty percent. I don't remember the exact numbers. But basically we had a record to run on. We had done the things that we had talked about doing during the course of the campaign. When you took the press conferences that had had done. We could literally go through those items on an item per item basis and talk about what had actually happened. Again we had weathered some uhextremely difficult economic times in terms of a period of very very high inflation and unemployment. We had involved city government for the first time in the economic development process, had used the city's bonding ability through use of industrial development bonds to put

people to work in the city of Springfield. At a time when there was not a lot of construction going on. This was also a period of time when the downtown was really having major problems because of the fact that the mall had opened in 1977. And the impact of that was being felt by the closure of downtown department stores, such as the old Bressmers Store and eventually what was the old Myers department stores as well as a number of other retail establishments in the downtown area. I think that as I look back and and it's hard for me just to think in terms of one term as opposed to two.

Interviewer:

Ahum

Narrator:

To a second term and things have a tendency to run together.

Interviewer:

That's fine.

Narrator:

Because a lot of things that you may start at one point, you don't necessarily get finished and it moves from one to the to the other, but I think that we, I felt that we had had made a lot of progress during the course of our first term.

Interviewer:

Now was one of your priorities an attempt to revitalize the downtown area?

Narrator:

Well, it certainly was because one of the things that was happening was the assessed evaluation in the downtown area was dropping on a year to year basis. You would have to go back and look at the numbers, but the property tax base of the city of Springfield at

that time as well as today is the downtown area. The downtown area at that time I want to say, and I am going by memory, and I would have to go back and look specifically at the numbers, but I want to say that the downtown, central business district of the city of Springfield, represented approximately 4.7% of all the land in Springfield. It produced somewhere in the area of about 19% of the property taxes. So if you talk about the assessed evaluation dropping on a yearly basis within the downtown, that was a major problem because even though you had the White Oaks Mall open up, it did not make up or even begin to make up in anyway, shape, or form the losses that you were having coming out of the central business district. So that again was one of the problems that we faced. We had a lot of vacant downtown buildings. The problems that we were having were not problems that were unique to Springfield. They were unique to cities all across Illinois and across the state of Illinois. One of the things that we had done during my first term was to implement the first tax increment tax district in the state of Illinois. The legislation had been passed prior to the time that I had gone into the office. Again, one of the nine points of our economic development program was to implement a TIF district within downtown. We talked in terms of revitalizing the downtown and TIF that would be a tool that would be used to do that. But TIF at that time was basically an untried type of tool in the state of Illinois in that while the legislation had been passed, in prior years there had been a court case filed that eventually made its way through the Illinois Supreme Court. It was only after the Illinois Supreme Court ruled that it was legal that you could implement that. The downtown tax increment finance district again was the first in the state of Illinois and probably for a long time and may still be, was the most

successful TIF project that we had in the state and actually one of the most successful TIF projects that we had in the country.

Interviewer:

Did this TIF, I mean how did it benefit downtown businesses, did it encourage people to set up shop downtown?

Narrator:

Well, the way that the TIF operates is that at the time that the TIF is implemented for the taxing bodies it freezes the amount of taxes that they are receiving and then any improvement that takes place that adds to the tax roles, that additional money goes into what is called a Tax Increment Financing Fund, and that money can only be used for improvements within the area. Now the other taxing bodies agreed to go along with the TIF although we did not need their agreement to implement that by state statute. But one of the things that we did as the city of Springfield is we guaranteed them that their taxes would not go down in future years and at the time we did that, that was a very good deal for the other taxing bodies because every year their taxing revenue from the downtown area was going down. So that when we said the next 23 years after you had several years since the mall had opened up of having decreasing tax revenues, we were going to guarantee you what your receiving today for the next 23 years most of them thought that was a pretty good idea. And as it as it turned out we had planned this in that we were doing a project called the Near North Village. And we had acquired the land using federal community development block grant funds. For that we had had to demolish those buildings had come off the the tax rolls. So that we knew that with the increment that would come from the development of the Near North Village that this would provide us a

source of funding be able to do bonds and pay those bonds off without having risk to the to the city of Springfield, which is what we what we did. And actually I mean as we take a look at the Tax Increment District today, which has been in existence for about 23 years, it is getting ready to expire, I don't know what the downtown would have been like today if it hadn't been for the implementation and the financing that came as a result of the Tax Increment Financing District. Although I very much opposed the way u administrations that followed me spent some of those dollars cause that was not the intent in terms of the way those dollars were spent at the time that we implemented it..

Narrator:

It is about ten till if your

Interviewer:

Thank you.

Narrator:

checking the time. [interviewer checks watch.]

Interviewer:

Mike Houston it's the 31st of October and the location is the same as before. His office is at Town and Country Bank.

Interviewer:

Okay, now last time we discussed your efforts about essentially revitalizing the downtown. Now were you also responsible or helped to open the building of various apartment complexes downtown?

Narrator:

Well the housing issue you look at the revitalization of downtown. If you truly are going to revitalize the downtown one of the things you need to do is have housing so that you have people on a 24 hour basis within the area. And one of the problems that we have had in downtown Springfield is the fact that you have people there during the day but they would leave at night. So that having a housing component is a part of our downtown revitalization program was extremely important. There was some housing in the downtown area. Carolyn Oxtoby had put some apartments above what at that time was a Thrifty Drug Store at the corner of Sixth and Monroe which is now above Merrill Lynch and Maldners. While there were a limited number of apartments they were always always full so that we viewed the housing component as something that was extremely important. The easiest thing to do and one of the things that really set up our Tax Increment District was the Near North Village which was senior citizen housing. We had the conversion of what basically was a vacant building which was the old St. Nicholas Hotel into apartments. And then we had the Lincoln Square project which involved, not only the construction of the apartments that area located off of the corner of Fifth and Monroe, but also included the rehabilitation of apartments on a second and third floors on South Sixth Street on the west side of the street between Monroe and the alley. So housing was an extremely important component of what we were trying to do in terms of revitalizing the downtown. And the reality is today is that we have a fairly large number of apartments with a significant number of people that that live in the downtown, which helps add to the twenty-four hour a day, seven day a week type of activity which you really need in a downtown area.

Interviewer:

And you would say in that respect your work paid off? And that you know people live there. It's no longer just this sort of ghost town after hours?

Narrator:

It, well, first of all it is not only a matter that you have people that are living there. The reality is that you don't have vacant units. Those units are full on a regular kind, type of basis. I can't work off of a number in terms of apartments, but I want to say that the last thing that I heard was that there might be 800 people living in those apartment units right now.

Interviewer:

OK, now during your second term, there was I believe a law suit brought about discrimination in city government and the results of that was simply changes in city government and the city council. So what do you recall about those events and how were you involved?

Narrator:

First of all, it was not a law suit involving discrimination.

Interviewer: OK

Narrator:

It was a law suit based on representation and the basic thrust of the law suit was that blacks had not been elected to the city council. At the time that the law suit was brought no one really took it seriously from the aspect that there was no law at that time for the plaintiffs to really have any relief from what they were looking at. One of the things that happened during the course of the law suit was that there was a supreme court ruling and based on that ruling there were then teeth in what they were trying to do. And actually

what we did is that we came to a settlement very quickly without any real expense to the city or to the plaintiffs that was agreed upon by the city council on a unanimous basis but which did not go over very well with the general public in the city of Springfield. That the newspaper editorialized against it and when we walked into the city council meeting thinking that we had a settlement agreement, Ozzie Langfelder decided that he was not going to support it. It was not an untypical situation in that he very often voted against things that were going to pass because that way you were able to be popular with those that were opposed to it. Those that supported it, the thing was going to pass anyway, and it did not make any difference. Well, lo and behold, he said he wasn't going to support it and then, I can't remember the exact rotation, but I believe at that point the next person who said that he was not going to support it was Pat Ward. And then Frank Madonna said that he was not going to support it. So walking into a meeting where all five people had agreed to support this settlement, it suddenly fell apart and it was defeated on a vote of two in favor, myself and Jim Norris, and three opposed, which would have provided a hybrid form of government that would have combined a commission type of form with an aldermanic type of form in that there would be a city council that would continue to have elected commissioners who would run parts of city government along with people who would be elected simply as members of the legislative body. The outgrowth of that was then the law suit which covered a period of two years and eventually cost the city probably in the area of two and a half million dollars in terms of legal fees. The city at that time was very divided in terms of what they wanted. Basically, if I recall correctly, as we moved forward Pat Ward, Frank Madonia, and Jim Norris were in favor of some type of hybrid form of government that had some combination of commission form with

elected department heads and a legislative body. I am not sure as to where Ozzie Langfelder was. If I recall, Ozzie eventually wanted to have some type of major, council, aldermanic form of government. But basically members of the city council brought in a professor from Northern Illinois University by the name of Jim Dvorack and he was a professor in Political Science. And they began working with him to write a form of government which they hoped to present to the plaintiffs in the case to get them to agree to. While he was there working on that, I worked with him on writing a mayor, aldermanic form of government which the two of us put together. Ultimately, we went through a trial. The city was represented by local counsel in terms of Fred Benson who was corporation counsel. We had representation from the Sterling Law Office and then we had representation from a law firm in Chicago. In addition to that, when we actually got into federal trial, I hired my own attorney to represent me during the course of the trial in that I was interested in pushing the form of government that Professor Dvorack and myself had put together. We went through the trial and actually on the day before the judge was going to make a ruling, overnight, literally everyone agreed to go with a compromise form of government that would evolve after a one term of office into a mayor, aldermanic form of government that basically was the mayor, aldermanic form of government that myself and Professor Dvorack had put together with two major modifications. In that I had both the city clerk and city treasurer being appointed positions by the mayor and as a compromise to the plaintiffs they preferred to have those offices elected. And we ended up settling that without ever getting the verdict from the judge.

Interviewer:

And that's how we have the form of government that we have now?

Narrator:

That is how we have the form of government that we have now.

Interviewer:

Would you say this whole event was a costly event to the city? Obviously, I mean not just a monetary, but, would you say, these events were I guess a deterrent to the city of Springfield overall of.

Narrator:

Well, I don't know that it was necessarily a deterrent to the city overall. I think most people today would appreciate the form of government that we have. I think that the form of government we have today probably functions better than the old commission form of government. I think that the form of government in the city of Springfield would have evolved and changed over time without the law suit simply because of the change in nature of the city government and everything else. The commission form of government for a city the size of Springfield was a difficult thing to work with. The commission form of government itself had evolved from a hurricane that hit the city of Galveston. And at the time of its adoption in the city of Springfield in about 1911 it was considered to be a reform type of government that was extremely aggressive. It fit the city of Springfield very well because of the utility and the fact that the utility was a separate department of city government with an elected official. But as I said, my personal opinion was that the commission form of government was something that would have eventually evolved. As mayor during that period, one of my major concerns was to hold the city together and not to be in a position to have any more racial problems than existed. At the time there were

very heavy feelings on from different segments of the community both in favor of a change in the form of government as well as those opposed. The reality is that the vast majority of the people were opposed to changing the form of government. And certainly at the onset of the law suit that was the case. I am not sure exactly what the percentages would have been at the tail end, but it was something that the city went through. It was a part of a growing experience. I do not necessarily say that it was a detriment to the city of Springfield to having gone through it.

Interviewer:

All right. But it did speed up this process of evolving government you would say.

Narrator:

Well, it did change the form of government. It didn't evolve per se. It changed rather rapidly. Again, there was a period from December 1987 until April of 1991 where there was a transitional form of government which functioned for a period of just a little over three years.

Interviewer:

Now what did you do after your term of mayor – what sort of work did you do?

Narrator:

I went into banking business. I joined the LaSalle National Bank out of Chicago. I continued to live in Springfield but I went to work for their public finance division and basically acted as a financial consultant to municipalities and different governmental bodies across the state of Illinois. And then after I was in for a period of time, I had the opportunity to join a subsidiary of what was the original Marine Bank in Springfield which was a bank that was owned and controlled by the Bunn family that was actually

chartered on July 1 of 1851, and was basically in their operating subsidiary, I eventually was a CEO of the subsidiary and then ran the Trust and Investment Management Division of the bank in Springfield and was a Senior Vice President there. I continued there with them through the buyout of the Marine Bank. In 1992 it became Bank One. I continued with them through the buyout of Bank One by J P Morgan Chase. And in April, excuse me, in the last day of April of 2005 I retired from what was J P Morgan Chase and became President and CEO of the Town and Country Bank.

Interviewer:

Now you ran for several other offices after your term as mayor. What were these offices?

And what were the results of those elections and why did you run for these offices?

Narrator:

Well I ran in 1986 for State Treasurer and was the Republican candidate for state Treasurer. In that office I was defeated in terms of the race. I had attempted to seek a third term in the election of uh.

Interviewer:

2003?

Narrator:

Would be [Narrator starts to say 2,000 but stops.] Well would have been 1987 and was defeated in that race as the incumbent mayor running. Then I tried in 2003 when Karen Hasara decided not to seek office to run again and was defeated in the primary.

Interviewer:

I don't recall but did you ever seek any state offices or just?

Narrator:

I

Interviewer:

Just government.

Narrator:

In 1986 I was the republican candidate

Interviewer:

Okay

Narrator:

For State Treasurer.

Interviewer:

So aside from that you basically stayed in local politics?

Narrator:

That's correct.

Interviewer:

Okay. [The tape is stopped and turned over.]

Interviewer:

Now reflecting on your two terms as mayor what would you say your major

accomplishment and failures if any?

Narrator:

Oh in terms of accomplishments I think that we literally moved city government into the 21st century. Again if you look at the time that I came into office city government was not involved at all other than to contribute I think approximately \$24,000 a year to the Chamber of Commerce for the Economic Development Council, and we've got city

government deeply involved in terms of economic development. We went ahead and faced a major problem with the declining assessed valuation in the downtown as a result of the opening of the White Oaks Mall in 1977. We implemented the first TIF district in the state of Illinois which I think probably to this day is considered to be the most successful TIF District uh in the state. At one time it was considered to be one of the best in the country turned the decline in the assessed valuation of the downtown around. I think that we affectively made changes in the police department, brought a different management structure and a philosophy to the police department, maintained control of the crime within the city of Springfield, implemented programs such as the neighborhood watch program which was a new program at that particular time, implemented dogs within the police department which they still use, implemented a horse patrol within the downtown within the police department and used primarily in the downtown and the John Hay Homes which the city no longer uses uses. Implemented the take home car program which is still in existence, implemented the sales tax –the city sales tax for the city which literally provided financing for the city of Springfield that allowed them to do many of the things that they did for probably for period of twelve to fifteen years after I left office from the revenues that were generated from that. We reduced at the same time we implemented that city sales tax the city portion of the property tax bill by one-third which allowed the school district to hold an referendum and to have an increase which was the first increase that the city, excuse me, that the school district 186 had passed since the one in 1974 and the school district has not passed one since then. As you sit down and think in terms of the different things that were done, there were a lot of good things that happened. A lot of things that, as I walked away, I was extremely proud of and things

that I knew would not have happened had I had not been there to make them happen, whether anybody else realized that or not. In terms of failures I don't know if we had any "failures" during the time that I was in office. There were certainly things that undoubtedly could have been done better, but I can't think of anything that I would describe as a being a failure right off the top of my head.

Interviewer:

And, if may I ask, what could have been done better, anything that stands out in particular?

Narrator:

There is nothing that stands out today in terms of things that could have been done better but I would be the first to admit that anytime you are doing anything there are always better ways to approach things and having the luxury of hindsight it's very easy to be able to pick out things that could have been done better. The only thing is I am thinking about things that happened over twenty years ago and they don't necessarily or they aren't necessarily things that jump immediately to my mind.

Interviewer:

Well, I guess that is it. So thank you for doing this interview.

Narrator:

OK, Pam.

Interviewer: Thank you

Narrator:

Hopefully you had. . . [ tape is stopped here.]

## Bibliography

Jaycees President, State Journal Register, April 5, 1973

Mike Houston Heads Jaycees, State Journal Register, February 4, 1974

Opening of Offices Announced, April 14, 1974

Re-elected, State Journal Register, January 19, 1975

Appointed to Jaycees-Committee, State Journal Register, March 7, 1975

Jaycees Name Award Winner, State Journal Register, January 21, 1977

Jaycees Honor City Man, February 22, 1978, State Journal Register

Barr, Houston eye..., State Journal Register, June 8, 1978

Houston Announces Candidacy for Mayor, State Journal Register, November 20, 1978

Close races seen as candidates head for February city vote, December 17, 1978

Com. Bonansinga indicted, State Journal Register, July 24, 1984

Lawsuit challenging city government goes to trial today, December 11, 1986

Springfield called 'divided' city, State Journal Register, December 12, 1986

Tuesday's vote mixes the new with the usual, State Journal Register, November 2, 1987

Voters will pick city officials today, State Journal Register, November 3, 1987

Langfelder elected mayor, State Journal Register, November 4, 1987

A big responsibility for new city officials, State Journal Register, November 5, 1987

Langfelder to take top aides to new job, State Journal Register, November 6, 1987

'Unity March' set Monday to heal voting suit wounds, State Journal Register, November 6, 1987

Weiskopf won't seek recount, State Journal Register, November 7, 1987

Aldermen organize committees, elect members, State Journal Register, November 26, 1987

Campaign and Election Materials:

Women's League of Voters questionnaire, February 13, 1979

Speech by Mike Houston on December 1, 1987 to the new city government

Campaign Bibliography of Mike Houston for Primary Debate – February 17, 2003

#### Footnotes

1

---

<sup>1</sup> All the articles and other materials listed in the bibliography can be found at the Lincoln Public Library Downtown.