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Dear Oaklander,

We begin the new year still at a crossroads in Oakland. By any objective measure, our city government is in crisis. We must bluntly acknowledge the gravity of our situation if we are to pull back from the precipice on which this organization is poised.

In the coming months, the Mayor and the City Council will be forced to make difficult choices to put our city back on the right course. These choices will be popular with hardly anybody. They will not be popular with city employees, they will not be popular with the media and they will not be popular with the public.

But here is the truth: A year from now, the City of Oakland will have to be a significantly smaller organization than it is today. The awful challenge for the City Council and the Mayor will not be to decide between the services we want and the services we need. No, that would be a tough enough choice. Rather, our elected policy makers will be forced to decide between what we need and what is essential for the city to survive intact and recover.

This government will have to decide what matters most for the city's future. From where we stand today, the re-establishment of public safety must be our primary focus. We must confront the painful truth that too many good Oakland residents live as if under siege. We need more officers, but we don't need them doing desk jobs that a civilian could do. We need more officers investigating and solving violent crimes. We must have a commitment to effective crime fighting and continued, serious reform of the Oakland Police Department.

Our community standard must be: If you commit an act of violence on Oakland's streets, you will be caught and you will be brought to justice. Until we can enforce that simple civilized standard, Oakland will continue to lag behind the rest of Northern California in the vibrancy of our economy, in the effectiveness of our public schools and in the quality of our lives.

All great opportunities present themselves in a cloak of crisis, and we are not alone at this crossroads. For far too long government hasn't worked very well in Sacramento or Washington either. Without civility and empathy, our leaders at every level of government have failed to solve our problems. More than anything else, President Obama's overwhelming victory at the polls represents a yearning among the American people for unity and reconciliation, a desire for an honest debate of ideas in a democracy animated by a spirit of civility – a civility which we cannot achieve when we attack the motives and defame the character of the people with whom we disagree.

Oakland deserves the kind of civil, competent and effective government that President Obama is trying to bring to America as a whole. Those of us who were honored by the people of Oakland to serve as public officials must bring that same change to our city. Although we face crises, I remain hopeful for our city's future. If our thoughts are clear, our hearts are kind, and our resolve is strong, we can create a better Oakland; a great Oakland; the Oakland that Oakland should be.

Sincerely,  
John Russo, Oakland City Attorney