Good morning.

Historically president–elects have stood before you and shared their thoughts on our profession. Today I plan to not only share my vision, which I hope will become our vision, but also a plan for execution that has a measurable outcomes. You elected me to be president-elect and during this past year, and the year I was campaigning, I listened to you and to our members. This is an exciting time for our organization, but also a critical time as we look to be even more relevant and impactful for our member base.

Historically, the AVMA’s greatest strength has been the high percentile of veterinarians as members of our association. Our depth of member representation and its diverse perspectives has enabled AVMA to be a strong and effective advocate and leader for our profession. Other associations look to us as a model in this regard and aspire to have this kind of member representation.

That being said, we are losing this edge.

Never in my career have I been more concerned as I am now with this trend. It means that we have not been adapting and evolving fast enough to meet our members’ needs. We cannot blame external forces, such as changing demographics, as an excuse for this downturn. Historically, individuals joined organizations (the AVMA) for access to information. Today, the information age, our members have enumerable access points for information – so we need to recognize that members need different things - help navigating their pathways to success. Data alone is not enough – roadmaps are now critical. We control our destiny, so we need to act and we need to act now.

It is critical to our profession that we have a strong and effective AVMA. And we know that it is through the voices and perspectives of our diverse membership that we derive our strength. Through our shared passion we can accomplish great things.

We have a responsibility to support this passion by creating a vision and executing on a plan that delivers real value for our members; by pro-actively recognizing change and adapting as necessary so the profession not only survives, but thrives. Our members are counting on us to advocate for them, and to protect & advance their ability to provide their crucial services; and we cannot let them down.

Throughout the 150 year history of the AVMA, we have played a critical role in guiding our profession, helping it evolve and adapt. We’ve made it our priority to understand and anticipate the challenges ahead of us, and to then make the necessary changes to ensure we continually meet our members’ needs.
The profession has changed dramatically: from the days of the horse doctor, to surviving the invention of the automobile; through hog cholera and TB, brucellosis; from the increase in the human animal bond in the 60’s, to food safety, research, and homeland security today. The AVMA has played a critical role in guiding and protecting our profession throughout our history; and because of that, we maintained a high percentage of membership.

I’ve reviewed presidential speeches from the past 100 years, and I have been impressed by the important issues this profession has successfully faced. In 1915, the AVMA president said it was time that we set minimum standards for the education of veterinarians. He addressed how the profession must tackle relevant issues facing members, such as tuberculosis and brucellosis eradication.

Over 50 years ago, the AVMA had the vision and fortitude to establish the PLIT and GHLIT to meet the ever-evolving needs of the veterinarians.

And what made these changes possible? The House of Delegates working closely with the Executive Board.

Compare this to the last six years: the great governance debate. We’ve been bogged down and wasting time when we should have been working hand in hand to develop solutions to meet our member needs.

This is unfortunate, especially when you consider one important fact about our profession: contrary to what you may have heard, never in the history of our profession has there been a better time to graduate from veterinary school and become a veterinarian.

As a graduate, my grandmother wanted to know why I wasn’t a “real” doctor. Today, I hear from medical doctors that I am so lucky to be in this field. The human and animal bond has never been stronger. The public is eager to get information regarding care from veterinarians. As the economy has improved, excess capacity has improved as well as incomes.

The reasons that veterinarians saw the need to start the national association 150+ years ago are still there – even more so today. This is the reason we are in this room. When the AVMA doesn’t do well, when it doesn’t live up to its mission as fully as it should, it creates a void in the profession. For this profession to be as great as it can be, it must have a strong national association – if nothing more, than our role in advocacy.

Because of our historically high percentage of professional representation, when we go before congress, lawmakers eagerly listen to and respect what we say. In 1966, we developed the first model practice act as a tool for state regulatory bodies. Professional Liability Insurance Trust and the group health insurance trust were developed by veterinarians for veterinarians. We set animal welfare standards. We
have a Career Development Center used daily by veterinarians. We established the council of education that set educational standards that have resulted in a great educational system that is now producing the smartest and most talented students and new graduates in the history of our profession.

Everyone in this room should be thankful for the quality of the education we received and thank our predecessors for having the foresight to set educational standards. The veterinarians of today are directly a result of a strong AVMA of yesterday, and the public has been well served by that. It is no accident that the rest of the world has labeled us as a gold standard for veterinary education worldwide. The council of Education has been directly responsible for our successes. There are those that wish it harm. People that I believe love this profession but now seek to destroy this COE. I call upon those folks, if your intent is pure to help us make the COE even greater to serve the changing needs of our profession and society and to not destroy it

During the past six years, we’ve had 10% membership decline. Instead of focusing on critical issues, we’ve been arguing over governance issues. Unfortunately, this heated debate has impacted our members. I’ve heard these concerns first hand from many members across our diverse membership. This is distracting us from things that really matter. Our members do not understand why we are not focused on current needs, like economics, student debt to income, wellness, and communication. We need measurable programs that specifically meet these and other needs of a constantly evolving profession and marketplace.

This decline is starting to happen at the student level too. We have seen a decrease in SAVMA memberships. In this day and age— it’s all about perceived value. So it’s essential that students clearly understand the value that the AVMA delivers for them. If we do not take action to reverse this trend quickly, this association and profession will have serious trouble.

As a businessperson, I have been sitting on the board of a publicly-traded company for many years. Our shareholders look at earnings per share to measure the performance of the company. I look at membership penetration as a comprehensive measure of meeting member’s needs and therefore the performance of the AVMA.

Looking outside of our profession, the companies who have done well have had great leaders that have had a vision and executed that vision to meet the needs of the consumer. Look at Apple, and how they have continued to thrive and reinvent themselves based upon the needs of their customers.

Now look at companies such as Kodak and Blockbuster -- companies that didn’t change and meet the needs of the consumer are no longer around
When you take a hard look at AVMA, it’s clear that we have not proactively changed as much as we could or should have to best meet member needs. I’ve been part of that process and it is time that we recognize it. We need to think and act differently. The Board of Directors needs to think even more entrepreneurially so that we are focusing on strategies, tactics, tools and service to improve the lives of members versus dealing with policies and rules. We need to get back to our entrepreneurial roots.

At the April Board meeting, I introduced a resolution to develop a subcommittee investigating how the Board of Directors operates. It is critical that the Board seize this opportunity and make the needed changes to become more entrepreneurial so that we are better able to listen and react to our member needs. I challenge the next chair to bring needed change to the board and have all decisions be transparent and rest in the hands of the entire board. I firmly believe that the key strategies of the association must be established by an informed vote of the volunteer leaders, and from there, the staff needs to carry out those strategies. We must become strategic leaders and set direction for three, five and ten years down the road.

The HOD plays a key role in our success as a key strategic partner. You, more than anyone else, are the connection to our member base. You are one of the most important drivers in assessing member satisfaction. It is critical for this association to understand member needs and then take actions to meet their needs and communicate back to them what we have done. Accountability. This one factor has great strength to reverse this declining membership trend.

I’ve always believed as a member of this House and still today that the one person who has the most credibility with the members, and therefore the greatest ability to impact how members measure the value they received from the AVMA, is a member of the HOD.

It is time the HOD changes how you we operate. To have to introduce a negative resolution in order to be able to discuss an issue on the floor of the house is unacceptable and antiquated. If we are to be relevant to our members, we must change our governance to allow current, pertinent issues to be openly discussed and acted upon by this body. At the recent SAVMA symposium HOD meeting, wellness issues in our profession and schools were discussed and a task force was established to look at this issue. Wow!

I challenge the leaders of the house, the house advisory committee, to tackle the governance issue. We need to be self-aware, what we have just gone through has not gone well. So let’s start fresh, recognize how the past debate produced discontent. I would challenge you to meet with new resources, who have expertise in governance of similar organizations, and formulate a new model for how we need to operate to be more nimble and be able to act on key issues that are relevant to our association, profession and most importantly our members. I challenge you to act swiftly and diligently and bring a resolution to the winter meeting. Staff is
working on a communication plan to facilitate delegates and boards members easier email capabilities to our membership. The failure to act NOW will have deleterious results.

Another group that is critical to our success is the staff of the AVMA. We are so fortunate to have such hard working team of dedicated professionals. I applaud you for initiating the strategic management process and dealing with the stress of this change in how you do business. I challenge the executive leadership team to make this process a success. It is imperative that the board, with input from the house, set direction and policy, and staff though the new strategic process execute the plans with excellence.

I want to make it very clear. I am very honored to be the President of this great organization. I love this association. I always have and I always will. If I have said anything today seems strong or overly critical, know that that I am trying my very best to make it great.

Some criticize this organization with the intent of hurting it. I criticize to help make it better.

As we leave I challenge each and every one of you to carry our flag and wave it high and proclaim to the world the value that this great profession gives to mankind.

Thank you.