

2020 Inaugural Address
Salvatore J. Panto, Jr.
Mayor, City of Easton

I am honored and humbled to stand here as the Mayor of my hometown. As I prepare for an unprecedented fourth term, I am even more excited today than I was twelve years ago. I have the energy and the passion to continue making Easton the best it can be. It's an exciting time to serve our city.

I wouldn't be here today without the support of some very important people. I would first like to recognize my wife Pam who has always been there to support me and her advice is welcomed. She spent 6 years on City Council and I trust her judgment, most times better than my own. She pushes me to be a better person. My father Sal Sr., the patriarch of our family. He has given me more than he will ever know. To my children who have supported me in so many ways and who have given me my greatest gifts ---8 grandchildren. To my brothers, sister and their spouses who have been my biggest helpers and supporters, thank you and thank you to my extended family and friends.

Thank you also to my longtime friends Howie Lewis, Royal Burpee and Randy Galiotto who have chaired our successful campaigns. To my dear friend Bill Murphy, who is retiring this evening. He has been with me since the day he arrived in Easton and our involvement in the Easton Area Jaycees way back to the mid 70's. He has been not only a supporter and friend but also my respected advisor who has always given me sound advice. I will miss him and his wife Christine. I wish him good health in his retirement.

And to the members of City Council thank you for your cooperation, support and for working closely with our Administration to make good things happen for our residents.

And tonight I say goodbye to one friend and welcome back another to City Hall. To Tony Bassil best wishes in your new role in the County and to our incoming Controller Chris Heagele who was a big part of our financial turnaround when he was my first Director of Finance, welcome back. To my Directors, employees and hundreds of volunteers who work everyday, sharing their time and talents to make Easton the jewel of the Lehigh Valley, I extend my thanks for making a positive difference.

When I took office in 2008 Easton was facing millions in deficits and our neighborhoods were plagued by gang violence, drugs and blighted properties. All that has changed and today Easton is a different place -- a different city. Crime has decreased annually; our finances are much better; we had an annual surplus all twelve years. We haven't raised real estate taxes and there has been no increase in sewer or trash fees since 2009; and our reserve account – millions of dollars in deficits is now more than \$5 million in reserves. These results are unheard of in most other cities.

Throughout our city blighted, vacant buildings are being transformed; the private community and public sector has invested almost \$1 billion which is transforming our city into the city we all remember and want it to be again. Our administration has also been very successful in being awarded more than \$80 million in state, federal and county grants. Our restaurant and entertainment segments continue to grow and today our City supports more than 120 festivals which are getting bigger than ever, with BaconFest attracting more than 85,000 people from all over the country. For the first time in five decades, our population is growing.

Yes, Easton is experiencing a wonderful renaissance and 2020 will bring additional private investment in all parts of our city as we develop the whole town, not just the downtown. Throughout this renaissance we will continue to be mindful of our history; optimistic about our future; and determined to fulfill a vision that will be appreciated by each new generation.

On the Southside the Black Diamond affordable housing development and the Easton Yards project will commence in former blighted, vacant properties. In the West Ward

the 600 block of Walnut Street new apartment structure will come online this year and the 600 block of Northampton St. Schwartz project will bring a grocery store to this food dessert. In the central business district mid-year we will be welcoming 175 employees of Hearst Publishing; the Commodore will commence in the former Kaplan's building; 56 North Third St. and the Ferry Street development will begin; and there are others that I cannot talk about yet. Construction of the Fourth Street Parking Deck and Pedestrian Plaza will start with a projected completion in June 2021. It will enhance our revitalization and economic development efforts even further. And on College Hill we will be welcoming 400 additional students that will contribute more than \$6 million to our local economy and enable our local college, founded by local Eastonians who knew the value of having a college in the city, to remain competitive as one of the finest educational facilities in the country.

The committee of residents I established to review and interview potential developers of the former Days Inn lot will be making a recommendation to City Council in the first quarter of 2020. The developments proposed are all in excess of \$60 million and the committee members are doing an excellent job and asking great questions.

All of these developments mean more tax dollars to our city so that more people and more taxable properties are paying their share and the burden isn't just on the existing residents, businesses and property owners. Our goal is to restore Easton to what we were pre-urban renewal.

We have not arrived at this moment by chance. City staff and volunteers are working everyday and our Administration will continue to **"make it happen."** While we may be criticized for trying things that don't succeed, we remember the words of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt --- "let us engage in bold, persistent experimentation. It is common sense to take a method and try it. If it fails, admit it frankly and try another. But above all, try something." Fortunately the things that haven't worked are few and the successes have been many.

Our Administration will not sit by and wish for improvement, we will continue to make things happen to improve our city. And while our critics will say DaVinci was a failure, watch out for what we are working on, it will be even better. Our staff is devoted to making Easton more prosperous, more inclusive and more vibrant for our residents, businesses and our visitors.

Yes, Easton is back! But today is no time to rest on our successes or to talk about yesterday. Today is a time to talk about tomorrow.

Without question, we face challenging times ahead. Our national discourse, once filled with hope and optimism, has been replaced with cynicism, hatred and anger. Federal politics today is no longer politics of cooperation and compromise but politics of divisiveness. In Easton we are steadfast in the conviction that our city's strength comes from our diversity and a fierce sense of unity, equity and inclusion. We may have debates, but we all seek to do what is best for the people we serve. We may take different paths, but our destinations will always be the same.

For a community that saw a decline in population beginning in 50's to a community today that has seen significant growth, our focus must turn to optimizing this growth while maintaining our diversity and creating community benefits for all residents. Whether born and raised here, or a newcomer—the people that live here are what make this city special.

I'm proud of the work we've accomplished, the investments we've made in our community and the foresight in our progressive plans for the future. It's with that same sense of camaraderie that we'll continue to carry on our traditions, take pride in our rich history, and, at the same time, embrace the diversity and change that move us forward, together, in a way we will make a positive difference. We have no time for the negative.

Our work is not done. We face significant challenges with our ever increasing pension legacy costs; affordable housing and affordable rental rates; preserving our historic

structures; improving our infrastructure; strengthening our economic base and tourism; preparing for the impacts of climate change and addressing the opioid crisis; and finding a balance between rampant growth and smart growth. All of these challenges need to be met. Yes, there is still much to do.

Home is the social foundation that any family's economic security is built on; it is the one item that can give them family equity. Protecting and improving the affordability of houses and rental units must be a priority and we will work with organizations like the Greater Lehigh Valley Chamber of Commerce and the Lehigh Valley Economic Development Corporation to attract family sustaining jobs so that our residents can afford to live here.

The American Dream should be a dream for all, and when the market refuses to respond, we must step in to ensure that it becomes an attainable reality for all. We need to offer a range of housing choice in the market, so that there is something for everyone. And that means market rate apartments and housing as well. Cities can no longer be the dumping zone for the nation's ills. But we can be the engine for change and assistance. That is the goal for the creation of the Mayor's Task Force on Affordable Housing.

We have come a long way and we have the opportunity to continue to build on our successes as well as meet and overcome the problems and challenges still facing our city. We have become a successful city recognized in many ways for our innovation and for meeting and overcoming challenges. Yes, we have many successes, but they are not enough.

When one of today's students, perhaps one of your children or grandchildren is being sworn in as mayor or councilmember in the future, I want them to be able to say that back in the day, back in our day, Easton made the right choices, the smart choices. We want them to say that we recognized and honored the value and dignity of all people and that we cared for the less fortunate. That we partnered with all who shared our

vision. That we made a commitment to focus on every square mile of our city, and that we expanded our view of resiliency and sustainability.

Our challenges are great. There's no mistaking that. But I have high hope for the future. To my family, friends, colleagues, Directors, employees and partners on City Council -- I say I can't wait to get started working closely with you again for the next four years. Because every day is a gift; every minute counts; and because every second matters.

Let's continue to build our city together... let's set the bar high, and , over the next four years let's reach it together.

Thank you so much – and may God continue to bless us all.

Salvatore J. Panto, Jr.
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