State of the City

2019

As I prepared for the State of the City, I am always amazed at the amount of progress good people working as a team toward common goals can accomplish in a 12-month period and how hard it is to reduce all of our State of the City to the allotted time.

Not so many years ago our community was stagnated – labeled dead in the water.

While the twentieth century was a century of flight to the suburbs the twenty-first century has been deemed the "century of the city"; primarily for those cities that cultivate innovation and creativity and where success is intentional and well-planned. The new American Dream is full of creative people producing great ideas, re-building their communities and creating new reasons for our urban centers to exist. I am happy to report that is happening in Easton.

The optimism and positive momentum we're experiencing are clear indications of why Easton's future is now and now is the time to capitalize on our success. Never before have I witnessed the confidence and excitement we're currently experiencing in our city.

We have the ideas, the creativity, the energy, the experience and most importantly the people to make it happen. The transformation of our city has been nothing short of a miracle. And there is more to come and more to do.

A short history lesson ----- approximately 120 years ago, in a moment *not unlike today,* Easton had to decide how it would manage its growth. At that time we were the largest of the three Lehigh Valley cities and we were one of the wealthiest cities in the nation. Would we become a progressive city looking to its future or would we be content with our growth to the point of becoming isolationists – to the suburbs , the twenty-first century has been deemed the "century of the city" primarily for those cities. Unfortunately our forefathers chose to be isolationists and our stagnation lasted through the time cities could no longer annex property, never expanding our borders like Bethlehem or Allentown or most other cities in Pennsylvania. The flight to the suburbs by businesses and residents was the final blow to any chance of success.

We have the ideas, the creativity, the energy and the people to make it happen.

I am honored to serve as Mayor during this amazing time in our history. If you had told that little boy growing up in Delaware Terrace projects that he would be mayor of Easton one day, and during unprecedented expansion of opportunities and challenges,

I'd have thought you lost your marbles. But we're here and we have opportunities that only continuity will bring to our community.

The old adage "Rome wasn't built in a day" is true right here as well. That means that every day we have to work hard to make positive change happen. It doesn't happen by itself.

One thing we need to address upfront is a word all of America struggles with. The word is change. We will not reach our goals without change. We cannot improve our city without change. We can't help our residents without change. Change is usually challenging, and that is certainly true in Easton as well.

At the suggestion of Councilman Ruggles we have made upward economic mobility a central theme of my administration. Two very important objectives in achieving this goal was the location of Pennsylvania Career Link and Northampton Community College in our central business district. Now our residents have accessibility to get the skill set they need to obtain a better job with better pay. I thank City Council for supporting our recommendation of offering them free space. It is the first step to increase the earning capacity of our residents.

Every organization and institution must have sound fiscal management; the City of Easton is no different. State Law requires that we have a balanced budget. We have increased revenues through economic growth and job creation rather than tax and fee increases. The City of Easton has overcome the challenges the great recession of 2008 and 2009 even though the city was in the Act 47 Early Intervention Plan as of 2006.

We struggled through the challenges and avoided Act 47 and bankruptcy. Our ability to avoid bankruptcy was not by luck; rather it was the result of sound fiscal management, correct fiscal policy and decisive decision making.

You can't cut your way out of a deficit without cutting employees and services. We decided from the beginning that we're going to grow our way out. We continue to meet normal increases every year bringing new money rather than raising the fees and taxes on those that live here and do business here.

As this slide indicates, our General Fund has gone up each year and it is the perfect graph to show that we have increased revenue without raising real estate taxes in 12 years and this next slide shows that we are relying less and less on real estate taxes to fund services. We have also added to fund reserves which were basically in a deficit in 2008 and today has reserve surplus of more than $5 million.

Unfortunately, Easton, like all other municipalities across this Commonwealth we must address the unfunded pension liabilities that are severely hampering the Commonwealth. In Easton this annual payment is now more than $5 million and is projected to increase. The non-resident EIT brings in approximately $2 million of that amount and city residents pick up the rest. The good news is that our Administration took a leadership role in this problem and started to fund the pension plan according to State law. In 2008 our pension fund was just above $30 million and today is more than approximately $52 million.

Fiscal responsibility has been a hallmark of our Administration and we have ended every year with a surplus and have increased our year end fund balance to almost $7 million without increasing real estate taxes, sewer or trash fees in over a decade – something unheard of for Easton and probably the first time in recent history. I would like to thank Councilmen Brown and Edinger for their time and efforts in chairing our Finance and our Administration committee of council.

Public Safety

After a tumultuous first decade of this century rocked by high profile excessive force incidents and community outrage, gang violence, shootings and murders, we knew the old way of policing wasn't acceptable. We learned a long time ago that you cannot arrest your way out of crime and violence problem. Today, our police department and our residents are working together to improve community safety, accountability and dialogue between officers and neighbors.

I am happy to report that crime is down again for the 12th straight year and getting safer everyday – last year by double digits. And as this graph indicates --- the last 5 years Easton has had a lower crime rate than the average U.S. city. Our police department is doing an excellent job in making our neighborhoods safe for families. Investors and families are again investing and moving into our neighborhoods.

I'm also impressed with the efforts of the Easton Fire Department. We've made positive strides with equipment upgrades, new technology, and additional training. I want to thank our former Chief, John Bast for his years of service and always lobbying for his firefighters and the department. We're leading the way in fire protection services, life-saving practices, and public outreach and education.

Last year this department answered over 2,252 calls, 329 which were fire and 452 were medical. False alarms continue to be an issue with more than 320 false alarm calls. Please welcome our new Fire Chief, Mike Krill.

Our largest department is Public Works and they too have been very busy making our city better whether it be our water quality, parks, recreation programs, streets or underground infrastructure. In 2018 this department: Designed and implemented the 5-year MS4 Permit Program to comply with Federal regulations for the removal of sediment from our storm water; completed the Karl Stirner Arts Trail Pedestrian Bridge Design for better access to the Silk Mill and also assisted the KSAT committee in the future purchase of the 14-acre Easton Iron and Metal property.

Another important project is the Cattell Street corridor project. Funded by a $1.5 million state grant the match is being provided by Lafayette College. This department also works closely with the Greater Easton Development Corporation.

The City also worked to completed Wood Avenue Feasibility Analysis so that the complete upgrade of this roadway can go to public hearings on the projected construction in 2021. Speaking of public infrastructure we also worked with PennDOT to fund 13th Street Interchange and that work has begun. Addition al projects:

- Completion of the West Ward Phase I Business District Lighting
- Rehabilitated South Side Culvert under the canal
- Competed the Downtown Circulation Project feasibility analysis
- Constructed new Hugh Moore Park dog park and expanded KSAT dog park
- Completed HMP Bicycle playground
- Completed Rehab of Rt. 611 Sanitary Sewer main
- Completed KSAT Musical Playground
- Expanded the diversity of programming in the Office of Recreation & Neighborhood Programs
- Completed the Pine Street Parking Garage repairs
- Started the application for Sustainable City designation which is part of our overall plan to reduce carbon emissions and increase the city's resiliency for natural disasters and severe weather events.

The major projects for 2019 include:

- Completing the West Ward & South Side pocket park master planning study
- Complete Phase II West Ward Business District Lighting
- Designing the gateway entrance in South Side along Philadelphia Road, St. John Street and Smith Avenue
- Implement large scale LED streetlight retrofits
- Complete KSAT pedestrian bridge
- Complete Downtown and Centre Square preliminary and final design & engineering for construction in 2021
- Complete Wood avenue Phase I roadway base repairs
- Finalize a location for a West Ward recreation center and open space areas
- Construction of a new Urban Farm at Lower Hackett park

- Complete Phase I, Phase II, and other activities for Easton Iron & Metal property
- Install gateway arches for Karl Stirner Arts Trail
- Complete City-wide way finding sign design and neighborhood signage

Thank you Dr. Ruggles for the expertise you bring to the Public Works Committee.

The Information Technology Department continues to be busy constantly updating the City's software and hardware needs and public portals to access information. With the completion of the IT requirements for the new police station the department made the live-streaming of City Council meetings a priority and accomplished that goal a few months ago when Council meetings went live. Other improvements included upgrades in the City Hall door access system; the visual signage at the Pine Street Garage for vacant spaces; expansion of the Nixle Emergency Alert system; and upgrades to the city-wide email system.

The Human Resources department was reorganized and professionalized to include a Human Resources Generalist and a Human Resources Coordinator. In 2018 the HR department filled twenty-four (24) open positions and Nine (9) promotions came from within the employee base. Please welcome our new HR Manager Stephanie Weber.

The City of Easton continues to evolve and grow as a hotspot of local and regional activity. The city has seen a renaissance as businesses locate here and residents move here culminating in a 56% increase in permits when just comparing the last four years.

Proactive code enforcement has helped bolster this confidence, along with improving the quality of life in the neighborhoods. There were 3,730 inspections throughout 2018. Seven properties previously certified as blighted, have received certificates of occupancy after renovation, and three others are under construction.

Our Clean and Lien program saw 32 properties cleaned up by the city contractor. The Health Bureau conducted 273 health inspections, and issued 276 Special Event Licenses.

Unfortunately we also saw the closing of a long time small family business -- Easton Baking and is further proof that we must be work within the new paradigm of retailing.

Looking forward this year, the City is anticipating another year of growth and high construction activity levels, with projects such as Lafayette's world-class Rockwell Science Center and mixed-use residence hall project and the Heritage Lanes expansion

and renovation. These projects are just a few of several large projects expected to occur this year.

Last year several projects were nearing completion in the West Ward and downtown. Most notably is the Silk Mill, the Hogtown Building, 118-120 Northampton Street and many residential building upgrades. Thank you Councilman O'Connell for your assistance and chairing the Planning and Code Committee.

Already in the cue for this year is more residential upgrades as well as the complete restoration of the Heritage building into the offices for Hearst Publishing which is bringing as many as four publications to this Easton location; certainly one of the most publicized project was the mixed use residence hall at Lafayette College which was resolved in a settlement agreement with four resident earlier this year; cleanup of the Black Diamond Site and ultimate construction of the affordable housing development for working families; completion of the Cheston school; the start of the new Cottingham Stadium; the completion of the four-story building on the 600 block of Walnut Ave; and development of the Boyd Theatre lot, the North Fourth Street lot and when they are completed the demolition and construction of the new Pine Street Parking Garage. I want to thank Councilman Vulcano for her assistance with the RFP committee.

The DCED last year also updates the city logo and slogan which was approved by City Council last year. As I stated, our City has seen continued growth last year in both our population and our total assessed value. Both are indicative of a successful economic development program. Thank you again Council Member Vulcano for your assistance and for chairing the important Economic Development committee of council. Please welcome our new DCED Director, John Kingsley.

Our team continues negotiations with the new DaVinci Science City project and City Council will hear about those negotiations in the coming weeks. But we are committed to the project provided it makes financial sense for the city and our residents. We believe our negotiations and milestone dates included in the Development Agreement that this project could be a real economic driver for our city as tourism continues to be increasing in our city, expanding our tax base and creating jobs.

I'm proud of our renewed commitment to the arts. More artists are moving here, more galleries are opening and the arts are adding to our economy and adding so much more to our quality of life. I would like to point out a special gift. We are truly appreciative for the more than $1.7 million gift of Steven Tobin sculptures by Mr. George Ball, CEO of Burpee Seed Co.

To increase our public art I will be proposing to City Council the enactment of a 1/10 of 1 percent for public art on all building permits for projects over $50,000 with a maximum of $5,000 per project.

One of our greatest assets is our parks and trails. We are fortunate to be located along three water fronts which all have unique trails and recreational opportunities. Families and yes even employers want these recreational opportunities.

Last June I was asked to make a presentation on our biking and hiking trails to the Hearst group. It was one of the reasons they chose to locate here.

The same goes for our commitment to an affordable, reliable and sustainable energy.

In 2015, we pledged to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in Easton 80 percent by 2050. We plan to have our action plan in place to meet this goal within the next 18 months.

I am proud that I signed the Mayor's Paris Climate Accord. To that end, we will be replacing all of our streetlights with LED lights over the next 18 - 24 months and we will add more to our Car Share program which currently has 2 on Lafayette's campus and two in the downtown area; we will continue to expand our electric charging stations in our parking garages and purchase alternative fuel vehicles for our fleet. The electricity we purchase for City Hall is from 100% renewable energy. But we must do more and we must encourage our residents and businesses to do more. I would like to highlight the efforts of one of our local companies --- Crayola makes 3 billion crayons a year and 1 billion of them are made by solar power.

I know many think our goals are bold and I know cost and technology will determine how we get there. But we must act we must reduce emissions and building a path toward a clean energy future.

Just as clean energy and carbon emission reduction are vital to a sustainable future, so too are parks, trees and open spaces. This year we have begun to explore the West Ward for a recreation center and more open space. Our residents need more and our recreation department is ready and willing to organize not only youth programs but also but also adult leagues and activities. The acquisition of the Iron and Metal 14 acres will add to our open space as well as some additional opportunities we are exploring.

Our tree planting program continues and this year we participated in the Tree Vitalize program which has planted several hundred trees in our city. We are proud of our designation each year as a Tree City USA designation.

Last year we continued to grow our special event with more concerts and the addition of a SeniorFEST for our seniors that included lunch, live music and bingo and we thank the AARP for their assistance and support. We also celebrated the 40th Anniversary of Larry Holmes winning the World Heavyweight Title including the nighttime showing of that memorable night when our city came out in full celebration. This year the MOOSE will be expanding our Comedy Night to a three-day ComedyFEST.

Our greatest strength to accomplish all of these goals is our people. *All of our people.* And their success is what propels our entire city forward. We have already have seen lower unemployment and increased median incomes over the last decade but we have a long way to go.

Our success brings new challenges. In the year ahead we must address the issue of affordable housing, homelessness and continue our efforts to reduce blight and maintain our fiscal restraint to live within our budget.

To that end I will also be recommending to Easton City Council the creation of an Affordable Housing Task Force to explore and make recommendations on this important topic. Affordable housing is a national crisis but it must be met on a local level.

We will continue to work with developer Tim Harrison in his quest to bring affordable apartments to the city at the Black Diamond site but more needs to be done.

Our homelessness crisis has been years in the making, and it cannot be solved overnight. But we as a nation must try to address the underlying problems of homelessness. Every night, too many our neighbors sleep outside without shelter, in some of the most inhumane and dangerous conditions you can imagine. While every single person experiencing homelessness in Easton has their own story, what is true across America is the need to help our neighbors move to safer places as we work together to build a better future.

Last year the City continued to help fund a Warming Center and I want to thank Safe Harbor and the Greater Shiloh Baptist Church for helping in this program. I encourage City Council to not only continue supporting our homeless shelters and Warming Center but also to expand the services in the coming year. But I send the message to the state and federal; officials that we cannot address homelessness without addressing mental illness.

I recall the words of the great civil rights leader, Benjamin Mays: "It isn't a calamity to die with dreams unfulfilled, but it is a calamity not to dream ... It is not a disgrace not

to reach the stars, but it is a disgrace to have no stars to reach for." We must work to give every young person, every resident, the stars to reach for, the goals to achieve and the skillset to get there. I was lucky, my parents reached for the stars and worked hard to move us out of public housing.

We will keep working every day to make the state of our city stronger, the state of our people even better.

As I said before, we are at the beginning of a new era for our residents. We have the ability, the experience, the training, the spirit, and the commitment to continue to make it happen.

A lot of that training comes from organizations that represent local government in Harrisburg and Washington. I am honored to have been elected to the Board of Directors of the National League of Cities and as President of the Pennsylvania Municipal League. I am most proud of receiving the Governor's Award for Local Government Excellence last year. As I said then, this award is shared with all of the council, the controller , the staff and employees and most importantly, our residents who work every day to make our city better.

We will continue to balance the history, the charm and the quality of life of Easton against new development and still meet our resident's needs – but understand that cities are constantly evolving. Our goal is to retain our small town charm, our walkability, our history, while returning our city to its pre-urban renewal larger tax base and a larger population and restore the pride to our residents.

I'd like to take a moment to recognize my senior staff and our city employees. From collecting trash to protecting our neighborhoods to filling potholes, they work every day to serve all of us. You don't always get the credit you deserve. You keep our city running.

I'd also like to thank my wife Pam and my family who have supported me and our city.

And the thousands of people like all of you who make my job truly rewarding.

As your mayor, I will continue to work hard everyday to create a city that works for all of us and a city our residents can say they are proud to live in. Thank you.