

2021 State of the City Address
Tuesday, Feb. 23 at 5:30 p.m.
by Mayor Richard C. David

Introduction / Covid-19

Good evening.

Tonight, for the last time, I'm delivering a State of the City Address. And for the first time, I'm delivering it virtually.

On March 16, 2020, I declared a state of emergency in Binghamton as the wave of Covid-19 cases grew in our country. These last 11 months have been a time for action, decisions and a reshaping of what it means to lead in local government. We haven't sat idly by, spectators to a crisis. But, rather, we've responded to and managed Binghamton's short-term challenges and planned for the long-term effects of this pandemic.

It's challenged me, as an elected official, and our team at City Hall — upending the ways we've known to govern for decades.

But more important have been the impacts on our families, small businesses, healthcare workers, teachers, seniors and so many others. Their struggles — loved ones dying, bills piling up, limited access to testing and vaccines — crystallized why our efforts were so critical. Why acting swiftly and boldly to help was our only option.

In those early days of the pandemic, we moved quickly to provide relief on water bills, suspended parking fines and fees, and waived the cost of blue bags for garbage collection.

We converted the First Ward Senior Center into a meal-pickup and supplies headquarters, and hosted rapid testing sites in City parks.

We worked with CHOW and local churches to support efforts to reduce food insecurity — especially in the Black community.

With testing capacity identified as a core factor in economic reopening, we became the first municipality to partner with a Southern Tier biotechnology firm to bring cutting-edge, same-day Covid-19 testing to UHS hospitals for first responders, essential personnel, local healthcare workers and the public. While Broome County has lagged behind in testing rates, we acted to expand access to tests and get our region reopened safely.

We initiated an emergency, zero-interest loan program for small businesses. And we worked with the local restaurant community to cut red tape and expand outdoor dining, reimagining public spaces to help businesses — and thousands of their employees — get back on their feet.

We're right now administering more than \$1.5 million in federal Covid-19 grants and relief funding. Direct aid is going to Binghamton nonprofits and businesses, to homeowners to help pay their mortgages, and to families to help with rent and utilities.

This pandemic has left countless families in difficult financial situations. As we work toward our short- and long-term recovery, these programs are protecting residents from life-changing financial burdens.

We're training our firefighters and police to become certified Covid-19 vaccinators. A few weeks ago, I visited a mass vaccination effort we advocated for and where our staff — working with the Broome County Health Department and UHS — helped get more than 400 seniors vaccinated.

I've long spoken about why Binghamton is different. These efforts took hundreds of public servants — who all the while kept up with the day-to-day operations of local government.

Public Safety

While dealing with the serious health, safety and economic challenges of the pandemic, we've also faced historic weather emergencies.

In December, a record-breaking 42 inches of snow fell in less than 20 hours. At its peak, the storm was dropping four to five inches of snow an hour — a rate impossible for any plow driver to keep up with. I salute Public Works Commissioner John Paddock and the hard working men and women of the Public Works, Parks and Recreation and Water and Sewer departments, who all rose to the occasion and did an outstanding job.

Over the last several years, the City has purchased newer and larger snow plow vehicles, added new garbage trucks with plow attachments to get more plow blades on the road, conducted more training for plow drivers and changed management. Our plans paid off during the historic snowstorm. City streets were quickly cleared, while other parts of the Southern Tier struggled with their response, which left many residents snowed-in for several days.

About a week after the record-breaking snowfall, the City was tested again when steady rain and warmer temperatures quickly melted all that snow. The Susquehanna and Chenango rivers quickly rose to near major flood levels. While the floodwalls and levees again protected our region from catastrophe, City personnel were prepared and at the ready.

Government is constantly tested by a variety of emergencies, and from the first day I started campaigning for Mayor, I made clear public safety must be our collective priority.

For the first time in 50 years, the Binghamton Fire Department will soon have a state-of-the-art headquarters. The new station will break ground this spring on Court Street, at the former site of a blighted commercial building we demolished last year. The project will reinvigorate a key downtown gateway and support the future of firefighting in the City.

Among the highlights at the new station is a decontamination room, which will prevent hazardous toxins from spreading throughout the facility, reducing the chance that firefighters are exposed to dangerous carcinogens after a fire. The project also separates Binghamton's police and fire headquarters to ensure continuity of public safety service in the event City Hall is ever compromised because of an emergency or natural disaster.

In the Police Department, we'll continue to upgrade our fleet with several new vehicles this year. And we'll fill all nine open positions with new police recruits, who are ready to start the academy next month and begin their careers in public service. This new class, which includes two women and one Black recruit, will become sworn officers in probably the most dynamic period in police history.

Every police officer in America, and every police department, is tasked with embracing the 21st century policing strategies we know make communities safer. Making sure law enforcement agencies are operating by modern standards means updating not only officer training and policy, but also the workplaces and capabilities of a department.

With a million-dollar project to upgrade the Police Department headquarters complete, we are now focusing on another major expansion to the City's public safety operations. Last week, I joined Sen. Fred Akshar and Police Chief Joe Zikuski to announce a half-million dollar project to expand and transform Binghamton's public safety intelligence infrastructure.

Led by the Binghamton Police Department, an expanded Southern Tier Crime Analysis Center will provide municipal, state and federal agencies with in-depth data analytics to gain a comprehensive picture of the criminal environment, support informed decision-making in law enforcement operations and promote crime prevention and community policing. The new center, which is being built in the City's old fire headquarters at City Hall, will increase staffing by bringing outside agency personnel and investigative tools under one roof, allowing for more efficient investigations across municipal boundaries.

The expanded program will be the regional nerve center for law enforcement intelligence and multi-jurisdictional crime fighting. By using cutting-edge crime data analysis and technology, this space will support efforts to combat drug trafficking and enhance community policing in Binghamton and across the Southern Tier.

I'd like to thank both Senator Akshar and the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS) for their support and State funding in making this latest crime prevention resource a reality.

In 2019, Senator Akshar also secured a State grant for the City to purchase a police rescue vehicle to assist the Binghamton Police Department's Metro SWAT Team. The rescue vehicle can be deployed in police calls involving hostage situations, barricaded subjects, recovery of downed officers, and as a rescue vehicle during severe weather events. In May 2020, Metro

SWAT used the vehicle assisting Vestal Police with a barricaded armed suspect on Route 17. With the help of our rescue vehicle, the SWAT team safely extracted the subject and got him emergency medical attention. An armed civilian's life was probably saved — and a police emergency response ended without deadly force — because of this rescue vehicle.

These investments are the latest in a long series of upgrades made to the Police Department over the years to enhance essential public safety services. We've equipped each patrol officer with NARCAN and a body-worn camera, added two cameras to every patrol car, purchased a new prisoner transport van with seatbelts and cameras, expanded diversity training, updated and published the Department's use of force policy and completed a host of other initiatives.

2020 will be known as the year where social justice, racial inequality and police reform were front and center like never before in the national dialogue.

When Governor Cuomo issued his Executive Order mandating municipalities reach out to the community and reinvent their police departments to better serve residents, it was simply another step in Binghamton's recent history of innovation — adapting, improving and being a leader in public safety best practices. The Binghamton Police Department has set itself apart in New York State in this regard, and Governor Cuomo acknowledged Binghamton's efforts during his State of the State Address.

As part of the public input process for the Binghamton Police Reform and Reinvention Collaborative, some of the most common comments we've heard from residents focus on police transparency and accountability, increasing diversity in the department and addressing the increased volume of calls dealing with substance abuse and mental health. We support these points, and others that are suggested.

That's why, last year, the City formed a partnership with the Mental Health Association of the Southern Tier (MHAST) in crisis intervention to improve BPD's mental health response. Knowing there are more ways we can expand that partnership, the City will allocate \$50,000 this year and another \$50,000 next year to help meet the need for trained counselors to respond to mental health calls with police. We will also commit additional funding as needed.

Increasing the diversity of the police department ranks to reflect the demographics of our community is another goal shared by those inside and outside City Hall. The only way to achieve that goal is to get more people to apply and pass the annual police exam. In New York, cities are bound by the State's Civil Service Law, which requires hiring solely on test scores.

To encourage a diversity of applicants, the City created a dedicated website, JoinBPD.com, for applicants to download civil service documents, view job openings and get in touch with BPD staff for test tutoring and mentorship opportunities. In general, very few people of color or women apply. Unfortunately, the national discourse surrounding police has impacted the number of applicants overall, which has dropped significantly over the last 15 years.

In 2007, there were 167 applicants who passed the police exam. In 2014, there were 108. In 2020, only 31 passed. When you factor in the additional agility and psychological tests, the number of eligible recruits drops even more. This is an immediate and long-term challenge to the community, and one City Hall and the Police Department will very soon address.

When Binghamton's Police Reform and Reinvention Collaborative efforts started last June, we took the time to set up an inclusive process to ensure maximum transparency and diversity of opinion. We created a dedicated webpage and held six different public hearings for stakeholders — more than any other municipality locally. We also hired an independent research partner, the Finn Institute for Public Safety, to collect and analyze department data and track community input.

We spent time talking to mayors of larger cities about their approach and identified best practices. We didn't want to check a box with the kind of perfunctory effort we've unfortunately seen from so many other agencies. I felt strongly that a rushed, knee-jerk process, like some activists were calling for, would not help us achieve lasting, positive and substantive changes to better serve every resident.

Take a look at Minneapolis, which was the epicenter of the police reform movement, and rightfully so, after the death — I'll call it the murder — of George Floyd at the hands of police. Community advocates and elected leaders did not take their time in Minneapolis and immediately voted to defund their police department. However, just this month, those same City Hall leaders reversed course and voted to spend \$6.4 million to hire dozens more police to address significant delays in response times and a surge in violent crime.

In Binghamton, by taking the time, we've been able to learn lessons from other cities and focus on formulating a public safety plan that best fits the needs and demands of this community. Police departments can and should look for opportunities to improve, and Binghamton's is no different. My pledge and commitment is we will find the money to advance any new public safety strategy or initiative that received collective support during the Collaborative's public input process.

Soon, City Council will vote to adopt Binghamton's public safety plan with community input and guidance from academic experts. We'll focus on smart policies and constructive investments that enhance community policing. If you haven't commented yet, you can still do so by emailing BPDcollaborative@cityofbinghamton.com. A link to an online community survey can also be found on the City website.

Blight / Neighborhoods / Housing

Late last year, our administration demolished its 120th blighted building.

Think about that. 120 abandoned eyesores, dragging down property values, hurting our neighborhoods and wreaking havoc on residents' quality of life — now gone. Many of the vacant

parcels have been sold to neighbors as extensions of their yards or used as permanent green space to mitigate flooding in neighborhoods near our rivers.

Following the success of the \$10 million Crandall Street Revitalization Project, which turned 11 dilapidated buildings in NoMa into quality affordable housing, the First Ward Action Council is planning a second phase. The North of Main Revitalization Project will rehabilitate a cluster of six severely dilapidated buildings and build additional housing on a nearby vacant lot.

On the North Side, the City will join the Family Enrichment Network this week to open a multi-million-dollar homeless housing project. The new building is located on seven parcels at the corner of Liberty and Virgil streets, where the City and the Broome County Land Bank demolished badly blighted properties to clear the way for new development. Once a cluster of eyesores and vacant lots, the corner now has 19 units of permanent supportive housing for unsheltered young adults, victims of domestic violence, veterans and individuals with developmental disabilities.

We're partnering, too, with Greater Opportunities to rehab four blighted North Side buildings — including the infamous eyesore at 39 Munsell St. — into safe affordable housing.

Just down the road, at the brand new Canal Plaza, all 48 units of workforce housing are already occupied. A partnership between the City of Binghamton, New York State, Sen. Fred Akshar, 3d Development and the Binghamton Housing Authority, Canal Plaza has provided the kind of quality housing hardworking residents deserve. It's the type of development that attracts families to Binghamton and supports new and long-standing local businesses.

One of those new businesses is Greater Good Grocery, located on the ground floor of Canal Plaza. In my seven-plus years as mayor, it's hard to choose a more important project.

The North Side had not had a grocery store for 25 years. For decades, as residents struggled to access healthy, affordable food for their families, they heard the same promise, over and over again, of a grocery store coming to their neighborhood. But year after year, no grocery store came.

When I took office in 2014, I pledged action and results. I faced the same obstacles that had made it so difficult for others trying to land a grocery store on the North Side, and I knew we needed a creative solution and the help of stakeholders who could bring different tools to the table.

So, we got to work. We forged meaningful relationships with partners like the Broome County Council of Churches and CHOW, agencies long on the frontlines of the fight against food insecurity. Sen. Fred Akshar and his team played a key role, as did people like Diane Brown and the Community Foundation for South Central New York, whose early support was critical.

Together, we took on a decades-old problem with a new approach. We found a sustainable, creative solution in Greater Good Grocery, a social purpose grocery store operated by the Broome County Council of Churches.

Since the store opened on Jan. 4, North Side residents have not had to leave their neighborhood for fresh fruits and vegetables, meats, dairy and dry goods. The store's product selection is growing every day as new partnerships are forged with vendors, and staff are listening directly to customers about what they want to see on the shelves.

The store has done about 2,000 transactions since it opened. Nearly a third of its sales have been to people paying with food assistance programs, underscoring just how important this store is to families in our community trying to put quality food on their tables.

On top of this, profits from the store support the broader efforts of the Broome County Council of Churches to end food insecurity in our community. Shopping there means you're helping make sure people in Binghamton don't go hungry. If you haven't visited Greater Good Grocery yet, I encourage you to do so.

Parks

In Binghamton's parks, 2021 will be another exciting year.

This spring, construction will be complete at the Harper M. Stantz Memorial Tennis Courts at Recreation Park — a total reconstruction of the City's premier tennis facility. While the courts are packed with recreational players and youth teams all season, they have long been plagued with drainage and court cracking issues. This project finally fixes those problems. We'll also advance a design for new tennis courts at MacArthur Park, which suffer some of the same drainage issues.

Rec Park was also where we turned a tragedy into a symbol of hope in our community. We kept our word and rebuilt the OurSpace accessible playground, just months after arsonists burned it down. The community stepped up with donations and volunteer hours. I volunteered a day for the rebuild and enjoyed rolling up my sleeves with City employees and volunteers.

Rec Park will also soon see a new, larger ice rink installed. After adding a temporary rink to the park a few years ago, I heard from countless kids and families who loved the new winter amenity — and wanted a bigger ice surface.

The smaller, temporary rink is now at Cheri A. Lindsey Memorial Park on the North Side, where families have been enjoying ice skating since the rink opened at the end of last year. We've also partnered with the United Way to expand access to the rink by providing low-income families with skates and safety gear.

On the South Side, the City is partnering with the Community Foundation and the Ross Park Zoo on a master plan that will re-envision the future of the 66-acre Ross Park. The plan will act as a blueprint for upgrades and grant opportunities, shoring up the future of America's fifth-oldest zoo.

And in a few months, the City's Summer Fun Program will return to Binghamton parks after moving virtual last year due to Covid-19.

The free five-week program provides kids in Pre-K through fifth grade with fun and safe recreational opportunities right in their neighborhood parks. After a year of school and childcare routines being upended by the pandemic, the return of the Summer Fun Program means local families will be able to count on in-person programming at City parks again.

Just as importantly, the City hires about 45 Binghamton teenagers to help run the summer program each year. The return of programming means more summer employment opportunities for our teens.

As I've said before, when we invest in Binghamton's youth, we're investing in Binghamton's future. That's why we're advancing plans for a new youth and community center at Columbus Park — something our area has been without for too long.

In the next few weeks, the City will select a design firm for the project and begin to collect community input on what services and programming will look like so we can break ground on the new center this fall.

Infrastructure

At the start of this pandemic, many local governments were suspending or cancelling capital projects and infrastructure work. Again, Binghamton was different.

We marched forward responsibly, continuing to deliver for residents by fixing sidewalks, upgrading utilities and paving neighborhood streets. It was important we kept millions of dollars flowing into the local economy, supporting the construction jobs and small businesses doing the work and taking advantage of historically low interest rates for municipal bonds.

There is no better time than today to make infrastructure investments. In 2021, the City will spend \$6.5 million on road construction projects.

The City has paved or reconstructed nearly 80 miles of streets since 2014. That's more than half of the city's 151 centerline miles in seven construction seasons.

Earlier this year, the New York State Department of Transportation broke ground on the latest phase of the Route 434 Greenway project. This phase will construct a 2.5-mile bicycle and

pedestrian path between Pennsylvania Avenue on Binghamton's South Side and Murray Hill Road in Vestal, across from Binghamton University.

When complete, the \$22 million project will ultimately connect the University and Downtown Binghamton, providing new recreational opportunities for residents and a pedestrian-friendly way to access downtown's businesses and amenities.

Last month, the DOT held a virtual public meeting on plans to transform the Route 363 Gateway. Expected to break ground in Fall 2022, the project will improve pedestrian and bicycle safety, enhance waterfront access and make upgrades to the pavement to extend the corridor's useful life.

While the DOT's public comment period formally ended this month, I'm encouraging residents to reach out to my office directly with their ideas and input. I want to hear as many comments as possible to ensure residents' interests are represented in the project.

Parking Garages

Binghamton's infrastructure means more than roads and bridges – it includes our downtown parking structures that are key to the entire downtown economy.

In January, we opened the 7 Hawley Street Parking Garage. The project took years of work by City officials and our partners to design the garage, secure grant funds and execute a difficult construction plan. The garage is well-built and well-equipped with technology and security measures. It will support downtown businesses, residents and events for decades.

Binghamton's other two parking garages are more than 50 years old. Late last year, we sought redevelopment proposals for the Water Street Parking Garage. Next month, we'll announce the results of that process and whom we've selected to advance a massive transformative mixed-use economic development project at a key waterfront property.

I'm not leaving the next mayor or City Council with major parking garage problems and no plan for the Water Street garage. Downtown deserves better than a 50-year-old hulking concrete eyesore, which should have been demolished more than a decade ago.

Binghamton-Johnson City Joint Sewage Treatment Plant

All major construction is complete on the \$275 million project at the Binghamton-Johnson City Joint Sewage Treatment Plant. And that's the price tag – \$275 million. To date, we've been able to secure more than \$75 million in State grants and FEMA reimbursements, meaning ratepayers in the municipalities the plant serves are responsible for the remaining \$199 million. When we settle lawsuits associated with previous failed rehabilitation projects, which took place before my tenure, we expect the amount ratepayers are responsible to drop even more.

For the first time in years, the plant is not only exceeding standards in a New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) consent order, but the effluent discharged into the Susquehanna River is the cleanest it's ever been.

We advanced this project with a mission to fix Broome County's biggest environmental challenge, which we've accomplished. The plant overhaul not only protects the Susquehanna River but also enhances water quality for the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

For decades, there was also a hideous odor emanating from the plant that years of bandaids and quick fixes never addressed. The calls I used to receive from business owners and residents are too many to count. As part of this newly completed project, the odor issue is finally resolved for good.

In December, the plant's newly installed flood wall was tested as the Susquehanna River rose to near major flood levels. The wall did what it was designed and built to do and passed with flying colors.

When I took office in 2014, even after decades of problems, there was no viable plan to address any of these issues. So we made a plan approved by the DEC and stuck to it, and the results are better than expected. The benefits I've outlined, and so many more, are the result of the advanced treatment technology we made sure was included in this construction project.

For the last year or so, the New York State Comptroller's Office has been auditing the project. With a \$275 million dollar price tag, I welcome the audit and believe any project of that magnitude should be reviewed by an independent party. According to the State Comptroller's Office, the audit is complete, a report is being finalized and it will be released to the public shortly. I have been told the audit will report no major findings, meaning this project was done by the book, transparent to the public and managed well. Most importantly, the audit should dispel all the false information critics of the project have spread since its beginning.

With major construction and the financial audit of the plant project complete, it's critical we have a comprehensive maintenance plan in place to protect the ratepayers' investment. That's why Johnson City Mayor Greg Deemie and I recently initiated a process to audit the Plant's maintenance operations to ensure maintenance plans are comprehensive and being followed, or expanded, if needed. While discussions on how to manage the Plant's operations continue, it's critical we take immediate steps to ensure the past management mistakes that led to this massive project in the first place are never repeated.

Special Projects

Now that we've secured Minor League Baseball in Binghamton for the foreseeable future, we're advancing a Stadium District Master Plan for the area surrounding NYSEG Stadium. It will define policies, goals and objectives for the next several decades related to land use, infrastructure, economic development and quality of life. With a focus on highly distressed

areas, the study will explore redevelopment of nearby parcels and commercial corridors to leverage our investment in the public stadium and create a more vibrant surrounding area, like we see in larger cities.

Several years worth of proactive upgrades to NYSEG Stadium were key in the decision by New York Mets owner Steve Cohen to keep Binghamton as one of the team's affiliates. That was the central discussion point of this meeting a year ago at the stadium with Deputy Major League Baseball (MLB) Commissioner Dan Halem and the New York Mets. We accomplished what many said couldn't be done — we kept baseball in Binghamton. Special thanks to Rumble Ponies owner John Hughes, Senator Akshar, Congressman Anthony Brindisi and Senator Chuck Schumer for their efforts and support. With NYSEG's naming rights expiring, the City and team will soon look for a new sponsor at the stadium.

At City Hall, we continue to make investments in 21st Century initiatives to make for a smarter, more sustainable and more efficient local government.

With a state grant, we completed a green roof project at City Hall and added electric vehicle charging stations at the new 7 Hawley Street Parking Garage. We provided clean energy grants for homeowners and commercial properties, supported a solar array project at Canal Plaza and are working with the Department of Energy on advancing a downtown microgrid and hydroelectric facility at Rockbottom Dam.

For the first time since 2013 the City of Binghamton will have a new website — purpose built to get residents the information and services they want most — permits, code enforcement complaints, paying their bills, and applying for jobs.

New code enforcement software will allow inspectors to make reports from tablets in the field for the first time, and make neighborhood code violations public and searchable.

We're also testing technology to allow the public to get a live look at our snowplow efforts during storms using GPS tracking. We hope to have it online by the first snowstorm of the next winter season.

Finance

When Covid-19 hit in March and New York State shut down major sectors of the economy, we saw immediate reductions in revenue across the board — including State aid, which is our third largest source of revenue after property and sales taxes.

Last month, Governor Cuomo announced aid for all municipalities' 2020 fiscal year would be cut by 5 percent instead of his original goal of 20 percent. Still, a 5 percent cut means \$462,000. That's a lot of money for Binghamton taxpayers.

And, in 2021, New York State has proposed to again cut Binghamton's State aid by another 2.5 percent, or \$231,000. Earlier this month, as President of the New York Conference of Mayors, I spoke directly to State Budget Director Robert Mujica about this issue. He expressed a willingness to return withheld municipal aid when the State receives all or most of its federal stimulus funds, which is appreciated.

Despite revenue losses and increased expenses due to Covid-19, there is some good news. Binghamton's sales tax revenue for 2020, which we expected to drop significantly as the economy was shuttered, was actually up for the year. The City received an extra \$294,515 above what was budgeted — thanks, we believe, to the newly passed Internet sales tax measure.

While I don't know the exact amount, every indication from Washington is that Binghamton will receive federal funding as part of the next stimulus package. The money can and should be used to make important community investments, pay down debt, further stabilize taxes and so much more. I look forward to having conversations with City Council on best uses.

CONSTITUTIONAL TAX LIMIT

The City's current constitutional tax limit is 82.32 percent, the lowest it's been since 2008 and another indicator the City's finances are well run and have improved significantly under this administration. Our goal for the 2022 budget, my final budget, is to get the constitutional tax limit below 80 percent, which is another barometer the Comptroller uses to measure the financial strength of a municipality.

FUND BALANCE

The City continues to have a healthy Fund Balance, or rainy day fund. Even after using a portion of our reserves to support capital projects and weather the Covid-19 financial storm, the fund balance exceeds \$19 million dollars, which is more than double it was when I took office.

As many other municipalities were forced to drain their reserves to stay afloat during the pandemic, in Binghamton we continue to have a healthy reserve while also paying down debt and cutting taxes.

OTHER FUNDS

In addition to the General Fund Balance, the City's largest and most flexible financial reserve — or surplus — there are several other "Funds" included in the city budget. Residents are also interested in the Water and Sewer Fund reserves, mostly due to the bills they receive every four months.

When I took office in 2014, there was no Sewer Fund reserve— in fact it had a \$4.2 million deficit. Today, the Sewer Fund has a healthy \$3.3 million in reserve, an approximate \$7 million dollar improvement.

In 2014, the Water Fund had a \$500,000 fund balance which has increased to \$1.7 million today. Not only did we increase water and sewer fund reserves, but also invested millions to replace outdated water and sewer lines as we milled and paved more than 80 miles of city streets.

WATER & SEWER RATES

From 2007-2014, City water rates jumped by 86 percent and sewer rates increased by 72 percent. There were no major investments at the City's Water Treatment Plant or Joint Sewage Street Plant during those years. So what exactly did City ratepayers get for massive spikes in water and sewer rates?

From 2015 to 2021, under the current administration, water rates increased by 7 percent total. Sewer rates increased by 47 percent. These sewer rate increases are to pay for Binghamton's share of the joint sewage treatment plant construction project I spoke about earlier.

It's early and things may change, but I do not anticipate a change in water rates in the 2022 budget. Sewer rates may increase slightly, and if there is an increase, it will be well below this year's increase of 6 percent and the final one to pay for Binghamton's share of the construction project.

As the data shows, those who said Binghamton's sewer rates would double, or triple, due to the project are dead wrong. Period.

TAXES

The last few years in this presentation, I've made a commitment to lower taxes and our team has delivered. Homeowners have seen their taxes cut five years straight. I'm proud the City's property tax levy today is \$2.2 million less per year than the day I took office, with taxpayers keeping millions more in their pockets over that time.

Had we raised taxes 2 percent each year as some had suggested, taxpayers would have shelled out another \$7.7 million dollars since 2014, and you'd be paying 23 percent more in taxes than you do today.

Tonight, I again make a public commitment to at least hold taxes flat in the 2022 budget. If our financial picture improves and the City receives adequate federal stimulus funds, we will look to make another tax cut.

I would like to take a moment to thank two members of our team, Comptroller Chuck Shager and IT Director Lori Clift. It's not easy advancing as many capital projects as this Administration has, while also lowering taxes, building reserves and righting our financial ship after years of bad financial decisions of the past. Chuck and Lori, and their staff, have helped deliver annual tax relief to residents through cost-saving strategies and effective financial leadership.

CONCLUSION

Despite Covid-19, despite economic uncertainty, despite a political system that, at times, can feel more divided than ever, my optimism has never faded for the City of Binghamton.

As I reflect on my last State of the City Address, and take stock of more than seven years as Binghamton's mayor and what I've learned in more than a decade in local government, I'm reminded of the old adage — "Never listen to people who couldn't, say you can't."

Unlike some who have opportunities in public service, we didn't leave projects on the table or abandoned certain plans when they got too hard. I'll leave office without regrets, because despite challenges and unknowns, we weren't deterred. We persevered and charged forward. We took risks and took action. We delivered for residents.

From the first days running for this office, talking to voters on front porches and in backyards, residents sent me here to make a difference. They sent me here to get things done.

While this is my final year as mayor, it will be a busy one. Our City's Department Heads and employees stand ready to make 2021 an active year focused on results. My thank you to them — dedicated public servants who have made this all possible.

Let's support Binghamton's homeowners and small businesses as they recover and rebuild from this economic crisis. Let's continue to invest in neighborhoods, deliver projects and programs for those in need. Let's see our community as a place where so many people have done great work, but a place where there's still work left to do. It's important we stay the course.

Let's take what we've learned these last seven years and continue to show what a local government in action looks like. Now and in the future.

Let's keep the State of our City strong.