

2020 State of the City Address
by Mayor Richard C. David
Binghamton City Council Chambers
Feb. 25, 2020

Thank you, Councilwoman Resciniti.

City Council, invited guests, members of the public and those watching at home — good evening.

A special thank you to the BOCES New Visions Law and Government students joining us tonight. Welcome.

When I was first elected to this position, it was all about the basics. The argument was simple — how can City Hall meet its most difficult challenges if we're having trouble with the small ones? Filling a patrol shift in the police department, paving roads, filling potholes, picking up garbage.

When local government does its job, and does its job well, it can inspire confidence in the community.

We didn't just fix the small problems, but advanced multi-million-dollar investments in affordable housing, infrastructure, parks facilities and blight removal.

People took notice.

These last six years in Binghamton, we've been delivering progress and movement on projects residents can see and touch and feel. And we've elevated Binghamton's status in our region, in Albany and in Washington, D.C. as a community no longer brushed aside.

A local government that is bipartisan and results-driven just works.

Binghamton's revitalization is happening block by block. Project by project. And that momentum is spurring more projects and development. Binghamton's story is being rewritten.

There is not a municipality in Broome County that can touch Binghamton's track record in housing, blight removal, public safety innovation, economic development and tax relief. It's not even close.

I say it not to brag — our surrounding towns and villages are partners in local progress, dealing with their own challenges and doing their best. I say it because while developers and state funders have taken notice, Binghamton residents should, too.

Search New York State for a better grassroots neighborhood event than Porchfest on the West Side — you won't find it.

Across the north east, show me a more compelling and beautiful historic rehabilitation project than the ANSCO Lofts in the First Ward — there aren't many.

Find across the globe a more innovative arts and technology exposition than LUMA in a city Binghamton's size — it doesn't exist.

We can't deny it — Binghamton's time has come. We can compete with anyone. And 2020 may very well be our biggest year yet.

PUBLIC SAFETY

Public safety is one of my top priorities as Mayor, and we must support our police, firefighters and first responders. We can't have a growing, thriving community without safe neighborhoods.

A few months ago, the police department welcomed 11 new recruits who graduated from the Broome County Law Enforcement Academy, now on the streets patrolling our neighborhoods.

I was also proud to stand with Senator Fred Akshar and Broome County Legislative Chairman Dan Reynolds to announce the Emergency First Responders Protection Act, which allows criminal charges against those who harass a first responder on the job. It was signed into law in a bipartisan fashion late last year.

Over the years, we've added back 12 police officer positions to reverse the shortsighted decisions of years past that gutted the police department.

Every patrol officer now wears a body camera and carries the opioid overdose reversal medication Narcan. We've added cameras in patrol cars, purchased a new prisoner transport van and new patrol cruisers, expanded community policing and bike patrols, and added more training opportunities. We've also expanded the use of stationary license plate readers and last year completed a comprehensive upgrade of police headquarters, untouched since the 1970s.

Every strategy is designed to provide new resources to solve crimes, enhance community policing and send a couple of strong messages. To residents: Your pleas for proactive policing and safer neighborhoods have been heard, and we're taking action. To drug dealers and violent criminals: If you break the law in Binghamton, you will be caught.

In the Fire Department, we've added a new fire truck and have a second one that will arrive later this year. Next month, we will receive five new first-response medic cars. This Friday, five new fire recruits will graduate and replace retiring firefighters.

A few years ago, for the first time ever, the Binghamton Fire Department received a Class 1 ISO rating — the highest rating by the Insurance Services Office (ISO). At that time, Binghamton was one of only six fire departments in New York State to earn the elite designation.

But there's more we can do. I have never been caretaker Mayor and even in my final years in office I'm not content with the status quo. I'm here to take action and get things done. I have seen too many former City Officials and Council Members squander the opportunities they had because they didn't have the knowledge or ability to bring people together to accomplish anything.

The Binghamton Fire Department's downtown headquarters is home to two fire companies, six vehicles and two boats in a part of City Hall not built to handle the heavy firefighting apparatus we use today. It's a makeshift area — years ago, they cut into the building to fit a 55-foot ladder truck.

There is real concern about how much longer the floor can support the weight of these vehicles. The ladder truck and rescue vehicle alone weigh a combined 53 tons. Keep in mind several offices and city personnel are located below the Fire Department floor in the basement.

We hired engineers to inspect the floor and prepare repair options. The results are bleak. \$2 to \$3 million would be needed to extend the life of a 50-year-old facility. We'd also have to shut down access to the basement and most of City Hall's first and second floors for months to make repairs, relocating several critical departments at a significant cost.

Buried electrical systems and other unknowns could turn costly — and not one contractor wanted to take on the job as part of our public bidding process. It's a mess.

Rebuilding the fire headquarters floor is not realistic for operations nor is it financially responsible for taxpayers.

So what's next?

With the support of Chief Eggleston and the firefighter union, I'm announcing tonight we will build a new state-of-the-art fire headquarters downtown to replace the 50-year-old City Hall station.

We'll utilize federal grants and local funding and pursue state grants to fund the new station. Tomorrow, we'll begin the process of hiring a design firm and we will work with City Council to move this forward. We must all work together, to support the type of facility the men and women of the Binghamton Fire Department deserve.

Vacating the downtown fire headquarters will leave a significant square footage of open space at City Hall. We will use this space to expand police operations and consolidate police offices

that are right now scattered in the basement. Desks and computers won't put stress on the floor like firetrucks do.

A new fire station and expanded office space for police are some of the largest public safety initiatives undertaken in a generation, and will not only enhance our operations but also sustain Binghamton's reputation as the home of the region's premier police and fire departments. That's something we should all be proud of.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Binghamton has raised the bar in its investment in infrastructure.

In 2020, \$9.8 million is budgeted for street reconstruction, mill and pave, preventative maintenance and underground utility improvements. Residents and businesses deserve new roads.

Full reconstruction projects include State Street downtown and Davis Street on the West Side. Neighborhood streets being paved include Mason Avenue, Broad Avenue, Glenwood Avenue, St. John Avenue, Park Avenue, Gates Street and dozens of others.

Throughout the City, we're working to make our streets safer for pedestrians and bicyclists. Construction will begin this summer on the \$750,000 Pedestrian Safety Improvement Project, which will upgrade the crosswalks, signage and handicap accessible ramps at 20 locations across the City. Following a public meeting, construction will start this summer.

Early this year, we launched a comprehensive floodwall and levee certification initiative, an important step in protecting residents across the City against expensive flood insurance. Binghamton is the first municipality in Broome County to tackle this type of project.

If Binghamton certifies that its 6.7-mile system of levees and floodwalls meets FEMA requirements, new FEMA flood insurance maps will show them as providing adequate protection.

Uncertified levees wouldn't be recognized on these new maps, meaning the areas behind them would be labeled as high-risk — kicking in mandatory and expensive flood insurance for homeowners with any federally backed or regulated mortgages. Phase One of this plan will be completed by year's end.

In addition to floodwall and levee certification, the City is advancing a \$1.1 million project to upgrade stormwater pump stations at Glenwood Avenue, Bevier Street and Rush Avenue. These upgrades will improve resilience at mission-critical flood management infrastructure, which were overwhelmed during the 2011 flood.

PARKS

For many of Binghamton's kids and families, the only recreational opportunities they have are at City parks. We take seriously our responsibility to invest in our parks, which not only support our youth but are destinations for tens of thousands of visitors each year.

The new ice rink we added at Recreation Park is a big hit with kids and families. We started with a smaller rink not knowing how much it would be used. I quickly received photos and videos of kids having a blast. We also received many requests to make the ice rink bigger, including almost weekly from Councilwoman Sophia Resciniti, who is a staunch advocate for parks and increasing opportunities for local youth.

Tonight, I'm announcing that we will double the size of the Recreation Park ice rink next winter and will also add a new portable rink to Cheri Lindsey Park on the North Side. Many residents have fond memories of ice skating when they were growing up, and I want today's kids to have those same opportunities.

This summer, we will also break ground on new tennis courts at MacArthur Park and Recreation Park. The current Rec Park courts have been patched up for decades and simply cannot be repaired long term. We will address drainage issues and add new seating to support the annual Tennis Challenger Tournament. We'll also explore court lighting to allow nighttime play.

We're in the process of securing a design consultant and will have both courts complete before the 2021 Binghamton Tennis Challenger Tournament.

As many of you know, last year, 16-year-old West Side resident Harper Stantz was killed walking home after playing tennis with a friend at Rec Park. Harper loved tennis and was a member of the Binghamton High School team. Harper's parents, Marty and Patty Stantz, are here tonight. I've invited them to hear what I'm about to tell all of you. When the new tennis facilities are completed next year, they will have a new name — the Harper M. Stantz Memorial Courts at Recreation Park — in honor of your daughter.

Plans for upgrading Columbus Park downtown are progressing, with designs being finalized and a public meeting on the horizon.

At Ross Park on the South Side, 2020 will be the year we bring a community focus back to Binghamton's first park and America's fifth-oldest zoo.

We're partnering with the Community Foundation, the Discovery Center and the Ross Park Zoo to develop a master plan for the grounds. From unlocking the potential of acres of hiking trails to prioritizing the next decade of investments in parks infrastructure, Ross Park will no longer be

an afterthought. Its history and promise can no longer be ignored. Restoring Ross Park will be a community call of action.

This summer, the City will also advance major initiatives to provide better access and amenities along our waterways. We should promote recreation and reconnect people with the Susquehanna and Chenango rivers. The City has several parks along our rivers, and it's time we do more to capitalize our valuable natural resources. I, along with our partners, will announce these exciting plans in the next few months, so stay tuned.

NEIGHBORHOODS

Binghamton's neighborhoods are where families live, children play and grow, and hardworking taxpayers make a lifelong investment when they buy a home. Preserving and improving the quality and integrity of all neighborhoods is what residents elected us to do.

If I lived next to a badly blighted property, I'd want it demolished yesterday. We've torn down 109 properties since I first took office, and tonight I'm announcing a plan to raze 11 more this summer.

Some of the vacant lots left behind after demolitions are consolidated to create larger parcels that are shovel-ready for developers. Others are used for flood mitigation in neighborhoods prone to flooding. Many have been sold to neighbors, who use the extra green space to expand their yards.

Since starting the Side Lot Program two years ago, the City has transferred — or is in the process of transferring — 15 vacant lots to residents. In addition to helping ensure these lots don't become overgrown magnets for trash and criminal activity, the program also alleviates the burden on the City to mow and maintain them.

When dilapidated properties aren't yet at the point of demolition, we need to focus on rehabilitation. This year, for the first time, the City will rehabilitate four properties that were slated to go to the Broome County auction. We'll bring them up to code compliance and sell them to first-time home buyers to support owner-occupied neighborhoods.

The Broome County Land Bank — a great partner of City Hall — will add to these neighborhood stabilization efforts, rehabbing three properties and demolishing two more within City limits.

Last week, I joined New York State Attorney General Tish James as she announced a \$585,000 grant for Binghamton as part of the Cities RISE initiative. We're creating a rehab fund for tax-foreclosed properties to help break the cycle of blight and providing housing and casework support, along with an emergency repair fund, to directly address substandard housing affecting vulnerable residents.

Binghamton is being recognized for its cutting-edge strategies to transform eyesores into new community development opportunities. Our partnership with the Attorney General and Harvard

University's Ash Center will improve outcomes and set a new standard for civic innovation in our region.

HOUSING

Last week, I visited fourth graders at Ben Franklin Elementary School who were sharing their visions for a better Binghamton. As part of a class project, their teachers had challenged them to choose a real-world problem they felt passionately about and come up with solutions.

More than any other topic, students talked about the importance of ending homelessness.

For too many children in our community, homelessness is personal.

Last year, I announced the City would be partnering with the Family Enrichment Network on a \$4.1 million homeless housing project on the North Side. At the corner of Liberty and Virgil streets, FEN will build 19-units of housing for homeless families, young adults, veterans and victims of domestic violence.

The project will go up in an area where the City had acquired and demolished dilapidated properties over the years, eliminating substandard housing and consolidating the lots to create a larger parcel for redevelopment. This is a prime example of one of the things we do with vacant lots after demolition.

I'm pleased to announce tonight that this project will officially break ground in April.

Just down the road, at the corner of Liberty and Munsell streets, is a project the City is advancing with Opportunities for Broome.

Our partners at OFB were recently awarded \$7.7 million from the State to fund the rehabilitation of four properties on the North Side, starting with the large abandoned apartment building at 39 Munsell St.

OFB's grant award was the largest in New York State this last round and the project will break ground this fall.

Most of you are familiar with the \$30 million luxury housing project at 50 Front Street on the West Side and the \$25 million ANSCO Lofts market rate project in the First Ward. Both of these projects opened last year, are full and have waiting lists of people hoping to rent units.

I'd like to congratulate developers Marc Newman and Matt Paulus for their vision, commitment and investment in the City of Binghamton. These projects were not easy, and both had unforeseen challenges that needed to be overcome on the way to the finish line, but both have had a transformative impact in their respective neighborhoods.

Last year a \$10 million project to rehabilitate 11 homes on Crandall Street was completed. Thirty-seven units of new affordable housing are now online, and I'm pleased to say those units are also full.

I'd like to thank the Safe Streets neighborhood group, First Ward Action Council Executive Director Jerry Willard and New York State for making the project a reality. Crandall Street was once one of the most crime-ridden areas in Binghamton and now is a showpiece for what can happen when we work together to take back our neighborhoods. Jerry Willard is truly a wonderful partner to work with and is here tonight. Join me in giving him a round of applause.

I can announce tonight that the City and the First Ward Action Council are teaming up again on a second project in the North of Main neighborhood. The \$7 million project targets seven properties for rehabilitation and one for new construction. We will hear next month whether the State funds this project, but based on our track record, we should be optimistic.

Last week, I announced a \$20 million market-rate housing project at the corner of Front and Clinton streets, the site of a badly blighted former car dealership. Walison Corp., of Mount Vernon, plans to construct a 115-unit mixed-use building on the 3.25-acre site with at least 6,000 square feet of commercial space. With rents expected to range from \$850 to \$1,350 for one-, two- and three-bedroom units, this development will help meet the demand for quality market-rate housing in our community.

Businesses and investment follow people and activity — especially at a primary gateway to downtown. The City has invested millions of dollars in this area in recent years with an eye towards redevelopment. Those efforts are now leveraging additional private dollars.

On the North Side, plans are moving forward on a \$37 million project to upgrade and rehabilitate Town and Country Apartments. This project will transform perhaps the most troubled apartment complex in Binghamton into a safe, stable and affordable place for residents to raise their families. Over the decades, a lack of investment and poor property management led to code violations and crime. The North Side deserves better, and with our partners, the City is advancing a plan to invest in quality affordable housing and bring positive change to this property and neighborhood.

The project I am perhaps most proud of is the \$20.5 million Canal Plaza on the North Side. This partnership between the City, the Binghamton Housing Authority and 3D Development will result in 48 units of workforce housing, and 15,000 square feet of commercial space. Take a look at these photos that were recently taken at the site. The project is on budget and on time. Residents can start applying to live in these brand new units next month, with the project scheduled to be complete in August.

The first floor of Canal Plaza will be home to a 5,000-square-foot social purpose grocery store, the first of its kind in Binghamton. Here's a first look at the space under construction. The store will offer fresh produce, dairy, meat and other food items and will be the first full-service grocery store on the North Side in nearly 25 years. Access to affordable food is a basic human need. No one should have to rely on long walks or bus rides every week. I'm pleased to announce the new store will open this summer.

I'd like to thank our partners at CHOW and the Broome County Council of Churches, State Senator Fred Akshar, and numerous foundations for providing grant funds for the project. For decades, people have talked about getting a grocery store on the North Side. But by working together, we made this a reality for residents.

Safe, quality, affordable housing should be one of the defining characteristics of our community. At City Hall, we are leading the way and working with multiple partners to deliver the housing results others have only talked about.

Ladies and gentlemen, these new projects in neighborhoods across Binghamton will result in more than \$90 million in new construction and rehabilitation. No where in Broome County will you see this type of investment in housing year after year.

DOWNTOWN

And downtown, our housing, commercial spaces, restaurants and taverns continue to flourish. But we're still left with an unsightly concrete square in front of the MetroCenter. After two public hearings to solicit community input, we're ready to move forward.

Here is a rendering of what the new area will look like. New lighting and landscaping, a performance area and seating will make this area a showpiece center city can be proud of. We will break ground this summer.

We will also move forward on the streetscape improvements as part of the Downtown Entertainment and Cultural Organizations, or DECO, District. We are getting civil engineers and landscape architects on board to advance a design, focusing on the area near The Forum and downtown's art galleries on State Street.

A project I've talked about for many years, at 70-72 Court St., just today moved forward in a big way with foundation testing on site to finalize structural designs. The 20-unit, \$5 million project will have new commercial space and one- and two-bedroom units.

Developer Mark Yonaty is here tonight. Mark, thanks for sticking with this project on a tight and challenging parcel downtown. Today's digging is real progress, and we look forward to standing with you at a groundbreaking later this year.

The project I am most frequently asked about is the new parking garage at 7 Hawley St. downtown. It's no secret additional parking is needed, and, in the past, the City neglected all three of its parking garages — to the point of near collapse in one case. Demolishing the Collier Street Garage in 2016 was only the start of our plans to fix Binghamton's parking headaches.

Tomorrow, we'll open construction bids for a 304-space garage at 7 Hawley St. We'll break ground on the new garage in early April, with plans to be open by the end of the year.

Once the 7 Hawley St. garage is under way, we will set our sights on the Water Street garage and the Boscov's building. With more than 150 part- and full-time jobs and \$800,000 in annual sales tax revenue, Boscov's is a major retail anchor in downtown Binghamton.

Last year, I announced my plan to work with New York State to secure funds to upgrade the Boscov's building, which is owned by The Agency and in dire need of repairs. As part of that deal, the City will build a new garage to replace the 700-plus-spot Water Street Parking Ramp, which is at the end of its useful life. This community redevelopment project will literally transform an entire block of downtown.

I wish I could say more publicly about this. I expect the State to make an announcement very soon on the status of our request, and the City and Boscov's will enter into another one-year extension in April so we can finalize the overall redevelopment plan. I'm thankful for Boscov's commitment to the City and to the State for listening to our priorities and working with us to address our largest challenges.

BASEBALL

Yesterday, Binghamton hosted the Deputy Commissioner of Major League Baseball for a tour of NYSEG Stadium, as communities across America fight for the future of hometown Minor League Baseball.

I joined Senator Chuck Schumer, Congressman Anthony Brindisi, New York Mets owner Jeff Wilpon, and Rumble Ponies owner John Hughes for a historic meeting in Binghamton's 140-year professional baseball history, at a moment when its future is uncertain.

We've all heard about the plans to gut Minor League Baseball across America. Past thinking in local government would've shrugged and accepted this fate. That's not the case anymore.

Top MLB officials saw the strength of our public facility and the community's support for the Rumble Ponies. Thanks to investments with local funding and state grants secured by Senator Akshar, Binghamton has positioned itself to push back on the baseball consolidation plan.

This City Hall not only executed millions of dollars in upgrades to the stadium — but has built the reputation and relationships to work with state and federal officials, the U.S. Conference of Mayors and, most importantly, decision makers to reach our goals.

We're concerned, but optimistic about what happens next with baseball.

The reason Binghamton is in a stronger position right now is because of the efforts to invest in upgrading the stadium. If we save professional baseball in Binghamton, those investments will be part of what did it.

Meetings between Major League and Minor League Baseball are ongoing, and we expect a deal to be finalized by mid-summer.

But together, we can do more. More than a hundred of America's mayors have formed a task force to stop Major League Baseball's plan to eliminate 42 teams in the Minor League system.

Baseball fans in Binghamton can sign onto a petition being organized by our friends in Chattanooga, Tennessee, who face losing the Chattanooga Lookouts. A link to the petition is available on the City's website.

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, the balance is more than \$20 million dollars, which is almost three times more than the day I took office. We're growing our reserves while paying down debt and cutting taxes.

TAXES

Binghamton has some of the highest tax rates in the nation. Previous tax hikes crippled homeowners, hurt the real estate market and made Binghamton an uncompetitive community for new commercial development. They're also the primary reason Payments in Lieu of Taxes — or PILOT — incentive programs are necessary to advance major economic development proposals.

The last few years in this speech, I've made a commitment to lower taxes and have delivered. Homeowners have seen their taxes cut four years straight. I'm proud the City's property tax levy today is \$2 million less per year than the day I took office, with taxpayers keeping millions more in their pockets over that time.

Tonight, I again make a public commitment to cut taxes in the 2021 budget. This can be done only if providing tax relief remains a core governing principle. Through cost-saving strategies and effective financial leadership, two members of our team, Comptroller Chuck Shager and IT Director Lori Clift, have helped deliver annual tax relief to residents. Please join me in giving them a round of applause.

CENSUS

I've talked a great deal tonight about tackling the challenges of today and how the projects we're advancing now will shape the City for years to come.

But there's one initiative that stands apart this year for its outsized role in what the next decade will bring for Binghamton and communities across America — the 2020 Census.

Census results not only determine New York's representation in Congress but also affect how much federal funding our community receives. Nationwide, hundreds of billions of dollars that municipalities rely on for infrastructure, housing assistance, emergency services and other critical programs hang in the balance.

If we want to ensure our community receives the representation and resources it deserves, it's imperative that Binghamton's count is accurate.

Tonight, I'm announcing the creation of a new committee that will bring together community leaders of every background to make sure every Binghamton resident is counted.

Binghamton's Complete Count Committee will look to increase awareness of the 2020 Census and encourage participation, focusing on traditionally undercounted areas and populations.

The committee will include representatives from the Binghamton City School District, the American Civic Association, the Broome-Tioga NAACP, local neighborhood groups, the Binghamton Housing Authority and others.

I'm pleased to announce tonight the person I've selected to lead this committee is Councilwoman Aviva Friedman, who represents the North Side and downtown — home to historically undercounted populations and neighborhoods. I appreciate her willingness to step into this very important role in her first months as a lawmaker. Thanks, Aviva.

CONCLUSION

In closing tonight, I take great pride in announcing I've been nominated to become President of the New York Conference of Mayors, or NYCOM, taking office this May. Representing some 12 million New Yorkers, NYCOM is an advocate for city and village interests in state government. The president position is one that three of the last four Binghamton mayors have also had the honor of holding — mayors Al Libous, Juanita Crabb and Richard Bucci are all past NYCOM presidents.

The term will take me to my final year in office. In many ways, it's my final step as mayor to elevate Binghamton's profile, bring the stories of our residents and our community to the statewide level, and to enact change and spread awareness for the challenges we face.

City Council, my fellow residents — this is Binghamton's time.

Let's imagine — 2020 can mark the beginning of a prosperous new decade: a stronger, safer, more vibrant community and a local government that gives residents peace of mind.

Let's keep working, across the aisle and across this community.

Let's keep the State of our City strong.

Thank you, and goodnight!