

**2019 State of the City Address
by Mayor Richard C. David
Binghamton City Council Chambers
Feb. 27, 2019**

Thank you, Councilman Matzo.

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

As our community, and our nation, sprint forward in the 21st century, it is becoming clear that the most progress happens at the local level, through decisions made in buildings and chambers such as these. Like many cities, Binghamton has in place the formula to get things done — bipartisan cooperation, quick action, direct and constant access for the citizens we govern.

City Halls may be the last place in America where that happens. It's why we see so many current and former mayors running for president, from cities such as Burlington, San Antonio, Newark and South Bend.

There's something exceptional about local government. Voters demand we be not politicians, but problem solvers.

And problem solvers we have been in Binghamton, on issues of tax relief and blight reduction. On expanding opportunity in impoverished neighborhoods and rebuilding a downtown — once abandoned and written off — into the economic and cultural hub of the region.

We are turning vacant lots into quality homes for our working families, fixing decades-old infrastructure and leading by example on issues of community policing, clean energy, and parks management.

This is an exciting time to be in local government, with important projects underway and many more on the horizon.

Let's begin, with public safety.

PUBLIC SAFETY

The City's two public safety departments, police and fire, continue to adapt to best practices and innovation.

In our Fire Department, data collection will help us better understand the future of our aging fire stations, notably those on the North and East Sides. These buildings will require significant investment to stay in operation, so we've hired a consultant to explore the possibility of a new consolidated station. The study will consider costs and response times, among other factors.

I will reiterate — this is just an exploratory step. Chief Eggleston and Fire Administration, the Fire Union and City Council will remain involved in the process. Our fire personnel respond to some 10,000 calls every year. When it comes to public safety, we need to make decisions based on careful study of all factors, not just the financial benefit.

This year, we'll also begin the process to purchase a new fire engine, replacing a decades-old apparatus.

On your way in tonight, you saw the ongoing renovations to the police main desk. The \$1.2 million upgrade will improve police operations and our use of technology. Our officers deserve a state-of-the-art headquarters, not a workplace from the 1970s. Construction finishes in April.

Any law enforcement official will tell you the ongoing opioid and drug crisis is the root cause of crime in our area. While local officials and the community have shifted dramatically to reduce the stigma of addiction and support treatment solutions, our police department remains on the front lines of the epidemic, combating the supply side of this health crisis.

With boots on the ground, the Broome County Special Investigations Unit leads that effort. The multi-jurisdictional task force is committed to suppressing dangerous drug trafficking in our community.

With officers from the Binghamton, Johnson City and Endicott police departments and the Broome County Sheriff's Office, this team is putting drug kingpins and violent criminals behind bars. Tonight, I can announce that in 2018 alone, SIU made 77 arrests for felony narcotics sales and 52 felony weapons arrests, took 27 illegal firearms off the streets and seized \$195,000 in suspected drug sale proceeds.

Add to this the work of the Binghamton Police Department's Community Response Team, the new technology in our Crime Analysis Center, and the officers added back over the years to support our Patrol Division and rebuild the department.

BPD works daily to root out criminal operations in and around our community, making our neighborhoods safer.

Our men and women in uniform have a difficult job, to say the least. While we have a duty to institute policies and programs that increase public trust and accountability within the department, we must also be united in supporting the institution of law enforcement and those in blue. I was elected and re-elected in large part because residents sought safer neighborhoods. Public safety remains the top concern voiced at neighborhood meetings and from Council members.

I recognize the other efforts that will reduce crime in the long term — greater access to higher education and workforce training, drug treatment services, better housing conditions, youth employment opportunities and after-school enrichment. Many of these I'll talk about in detail tonight.

But those efforts have to accompany a well-staffed, well-trained and well-equipped police department able to respond quickly to calls and help the public.

HOUSING

A critical element for any thriving City is housing. Providing more safe, quality, affordable housing has been a cornerstone of this administration.

Student housing, which was the primary focus years ago, is oversaturated in Binghamton. When I took office, residents rightfully asked when the City would advance housing initiatives for everyone else. Five years later, the answer can be seen across Binghamton.

We started by tackling homelessness among Binghamton's veterans, earning national recognition along the way. Here's a Tweet from former Obama Secretary of Housing and Urban Development and someone you may know as a Democratic candidate for president, Julian Castro, recognizing Binghamton as the first U.S. city to end veteran homelessness, part of a White House challenge. The 10-unit building on Pine Street the City renovated to house homeless vets is full. No veteran should ever go without a roof over his or her head. It is our moral and patriotic obligation.

This summer, the Family Enrichment Network will break ground on a \$4.2 million homeless housing development on the North Side. The building will house up to 64 people, including homeless veterans, families, victims of domestic violence and young adults. FEN will provide on-site support services, including case management, rental assistance and adult literacy courses. Over the years, the City demolished badly blighted buildings to clear the site for new development. We also contributed \$100,000 for construction costs. The 19-unit building will open early next year.

Also on the North Side, full construction will begin shortly on the \$20.5 million Canal Plaza affordable housing project on the former Big Lots site. The 48 apartments and 15,000 square-feet of commercial space should be complete early next year. Our partners, Bruce Levine from 3D Development, Elaine Miller from the Binghamton Housing Authority, and Senator Fred Akshar, all contributed to secure funding and move it forward.

On the West Side, a \$10 million project is halfway done to turn 10 blighted properties on Crandall and North streets into 37 units of quality affordable housing. What used to be one of the highest-volume areas for police calls in the City will soon be a model of grassroots neighborhood revitalization.

As part of that project, a new community center has opened on the ground floor of 47 North St. The building, which dates back to the 1870s, had been slated for demolition after years of neglect. We worked with neighbors and Councilwoman Dani Cronce to save the historic landmark. In addition to newly renovated apartments for low-income residents, the building has the Binghamton-Broome Anti-Poverty Initiative operating from the community center.

In the First Ward, Paulus Development's \$30 million market-rate housing project is well underway. A partnership between the City of Binghamton, Broome County and The Agency, it will add 100 units of in-demand housing geared toward young professionals and empty nesters. I toured the Emma Street building a few days ago with developer Matt Paulus and was excited to see this historic rehabilitation take shape. Located in the former Ansco Camera factory, this once-vacant building is alive with new activity and an anchor of revitalization for the First Ward. How many historic industrial buildings in Upstate New York are home to both loft living and high-tech manufacturing, like E&M Power, who will locate on the first floor.

Downtown, the \$5 million mixed-use building at 7 Hawley St. is moving forward after years of legal and financial hurdles. In addition to much-needed parking, the project includes 18 units of market-rate housing and 6,000 square-feet of commercial space. Geotechnical work just wrapped, with major work scheduled to begin in the spring.

Perhaps Binghamton's most high-profile housing development is 50 Front St. on the West Side. The \$30 million high-end waterfront building is scheduled to open later this year. I'm pleased to share with you some of the first images from inside the building. 50 Front Street is one of the latest projects from local developer Marc Newman, whose pioneering initiatives have led countless revitalization efforts in the Southern Tier.

Across the City, we're creating housing for the people who have been here and who plan to stay, people of all incomes and stages of life.

You may have heard there is \$100 million in investment happening across Broome County. Ladies and gentlemen, just in the City of Binghamton there is \$100 million in public and private housing development coming online or in development right now — and none of it is focused on students. Really unprecedented.

BLIGHT

While much-needed, new construction and rehabilitation are just part of an overall strategy on housing and neighborhoods.

Aging and dilapidated homes we can't save must be demolished. No municipality or administration has tackled more blight to date than this team. From the most visible areas of the City to the most remote neighborhoods, blight affects everyone. I'm pleased to announce that, in the next few months, the City will surpass its 100th demolition since I took office in 2014.

Just last week, we tore down 10 Judson Ave. in the First Ward. As Councilman Scaringi will tell you, this eyesore was a neighborhood nuisance for years. Even a third grade class at Woodrow Wilson Elementary School once lobbied me to tear it down — they were pretty tough. The property is privately owned, so we had to push through red tape and litigation. And we did. About a dozen more properties are slated for demolition this year.

As part of the Cities RISE program through the New York State Attorney General, we're utilizing technology and cutting-edge strategies to address blight. This spring, I will join City officials at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government to collaborate with faculty and experts on how to reduce our distressed property count, build effective Code Enforcement practices and increase quality of life.

A series of factors contributes to the erosion of neighborhoods across the Triple Cities. Not least is the County's flawed foreclosure process and property auction, which affects all municipalities. I hear constantly from residents outside the City, who want more attention paid to blight and demolitions in their communities. This year, we will reach out to mayors and town supervisors around Broome County to help them replicate the model that's led to Binghamton's success.

DOWNTOWN

Binghamton's downtown continues its resurgence. New businesses have given life to shuttered storefronts and drawn more people into the City's core.

Downtown's food and drink scene keeps growing, with new restaurants like Dos Rios, Craft and 205 Dry joining the list of places to visit. This year, SUNY Broome's culinary school will open on Exchange Street, increasing downtown Binghamton's reputation as a food hub.

Down the road, the Koffman Southern Tier Incubator is home to dozens of startup companies, many graduating and finding permanent storefronts and offices in the City of Binghamton.

Flagship events like LUMA are growing, shining an ever-brighter spotlight on Binghamton. This fall, the popular projection arts festival will return for its fifth year, bringing thousands of people to downtown and filling our restaurants, shops and hotels.

An overhaul of NYSEG Stadium is bringing the home of the Binghamton Rumble Ponies into the modern era and will provide a better experience for future fans and visitors. Senator Fred Akshar helped secure \$2.5 million in state funds to match the City's investment. The deal saved the public-owned stadium, built in 1992, from slipping below Minor League Baseball standards, which would have prevented the team from playing at home this season. Instead, with renovations advancing, Rumble Ponies ownership has extended its lease until 2026, and talks are underway to keep professional baseball in Binghamton for many years to come.

Later this year, work will begin on the \$3.7 million Downtown Entertainment and Cultural Organizations District. Jump-started by a \$1.7 million state award, the DECO District will build off existing arts anchors from Court Street to Lewis Street. New public art and improvements to streetscapes, gateways, intersections and other public spaces will create a unified arts and culture district that is more walkable and visibly attractive. The Washington Street pedestrian mall will be transformed. Upgrades to the Forum Theatre, located at the heart of the DECO District, will help the venue better serve more patrons for years to come.

It's a concept talked about for years. Once complete, it will have a lasting and catalytic impact on the City.

STONE OPERA HOUSE & STRAND THEATER

In the midst of downtown's renaissance stands two historic buildings stuck in neutral. On Chenango Street, the Stone Opera House and Strand Theater are architectural icons of Binghamton's history.

You may not know, but in 1900, Theodore Roosevelt addressed thousands of Binghamton residents at the Stone Opera House on a whistle-stop campaign tour.

Sadly, these beautiful buildings so rich in history face great barriers to redevelopment. Decades of deterioration means without stabilization and investment, they may not survive.

Tonight, I'm announcing an effort to help save and repurpose the Stone and the Strand. Teaming up with the private sector and supported by a state historic preservation grant, the City will advance a \$100,000 structural assessment and restoration plan for both buildings. This effort will serve as a catalyst for future grant funding, historic tax credits and renewed public awareness of the buildings' potential.

Each day these old buildings sit idle is a day closer to their permanent extinction. City Hall will step up as stewards of these historic assets, advancing a public-private partnership to find the right long-term redevelopment.

BOSCOV'S

As one retailer after another leaves the Oakdale Mall, I am committed to doing everything we can to keep Boscov's a downtown anchor. The store provides 150 jobs and close to \$1 million in annual sales tax revenue.

But the building and its facade desperately need upgrades. There's no Plan B — if we don't step up and deliver on these priorities, we risk seeing Boscov's close their doors for good.

On Monday, CEO Jim Boscov and I met in Albany with Governor Cuomo's top economic development staff. It was reassuring to hear the state recognizes the importance of Boscov's and is committed to working with the City to put together a deal. We hope to have more news later this year.

PARKING

A revitalized downtown has led to a higher parking demand. This spring, we will break ground on the essential 300-space parking garage at 7 Hawley St.

But we still have two aging parking garages at Water and State streets. In Binghamton, we've become so accustomed to the terrible condition of these structures, we see right through them. In 2016, we had to demolish the Collier Street garage in fear of its collapse. In 2006, a 7,000-pound concrete slab fell off the Water Street garage, splitting a trailer parked near the Boscov's loading dock.

Previous leaders have passed the buck. To compound our challenge, other levels of government that benefit from Binghamton's parking facilities are not interested in addressing this issue. To date, only the State has provided minimal funding. So the task falls solely on City Hall.

That may not be fair, but I'm not going to leave the next Mayor or City Council with major problems at our two remaining garages. Patches and Band-Aids won't work anymore.

Tonight, I'm announcing we will issue request for proposals this year to rebuild and redevelop our two remaining parking garages — Water Street and State Street — into mixed-use projects. Downtown deserves better than 60-year-old hulking concrete eyesores.

As we did with 7 Hawley St., we will work with developers to identify a range of options that work for Binghamton. We don't know yet what these plans will look like. But why not push the envelope when it comes to urban design and redevelopment?

I might not be in office when these concepts are realized years from now, but I will not be a caretaker satisfied with the status quo. Remaking the future of these parcels begins now.

CHARLES STREET BUSINESS PARK

In the First Ward, the City has stepped up to take on a longtime economic development challenge in the Charles Street Business Park. Controlled by the Broome County Industrial Development Agency, the park has sat mostly empty and shovel-ready since its inception.

Last year, we worked with the Agency to secure a deal for Save-A-Round to locate its headquarters in the former Emerson building, retaining 75 jobs. Tonight, I'm pleased to announce we've reached an agreement with The Agency to acquire the remaining 14.5 acres of land. The Binghamton Local Development Corporation (BLDC) will close on the Charles Street Business Park in the next few months.

I'd like to thank the Agency for its commitment to working with the City. With the parcel now under City control, we can focus resources on working with companies interested in locating their businesses and operations there. Councilman Scaringi, I look forward to working with you on making this park the economic anchor the First Ward deserves.

GROCERY STORE

One of the initiatives we are most proud of is delivering a full-service grocery store to the North Side.

The store will be located in the Canal Plaza project I spoke about earlier. The Community Hunger Outreach Warehouse (CHOW) will operate the 5,000-square-foot store, and I'd like to recognize Dr. Joe Sellepack and his team for their commitment to this initiative.

Our collective success is the result of partnerships with CHOW, Senator Fred Akshar, the Community Foundation and many, many others. Modeled after a non-profit grocery in Utica, the store will have fresh fruits and vegetables, meats, dairy products, frozen foods and more.

As a social purpose store, profits will support services provided by the Council of Churches, including programs addressing food insecurity. The store will hire and train local residents, too.

North Siders have been without a grocery store for the last two decades. Changing that has been one of the most elusive and difficult challenges locally. But access to food is a basic necessity, and failure could not be an option. Leases are signed, and the store is scheduled to open early next year.

GREEN

Through state investment, local entrepreneurship and forward-thinking municipal leadership, Binghamton and the Southern Tier have become a hub for clean-energy innovation and the 21st century green economy.

In 2017, Binghamton was the first Southern Tier city named a Clean Energy Community by the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority, or NYSERDA.

Annually, Binghamton hosts NYSERDA's 76West Clean Energy Competition, which attracts entrepreneurs to our region to build sustainable businesses. The competition has generated tens of millions in private investment and new jobs. Soon, a smart thermostat company called Hub Controls from Ireland will locate offices in the downtown incubator as one of the contest awardees.

Last summer, I was pleased to accept a Mayors' Climate Protection Award honorable mention from the U.S. Conference of Mayors for the City's conversion to LED streetlights.

We also streamlined our permitting process for new solar panels and electric vehicle charging stations, and plans are advancing for green roof at City Hall.

Binghamton's downtown microgrid plan is on the short list to receive \$10 million in NYSERDA funding, providing a resilient and sustainable energy source which also unlocks the hydroelectric potential at Rockbottom Dam.

There's much more on the horizon as Binghamton leads our region in green initiatives as part of our collective efforts to address climate change.

In the next few weeks, we'll launch a \$200,000 matching fund to support green-energy upgrades for homeowners and business. We'll soon add two zero-emission electric vehicles to the City's fleet and announce efforts to reduce the energy burden for low-income households through community solar.

Tonight, we will take our most public step to support renewable energy yet. I'm announcing that the City of Binghamton will move to 100 percent renewable electricity in 2019 for municipal operations. Streetlights, fire stations, City Hall — all supported by renewable electricity. We'll do this by purchasing Renewable Energy Certificates to cover 100 percent of our forecasted usage.

Binghamton is taking the lead on green issues and is an example of what local governments can do.

In addition to green energy, City Hall is supporting the growth of sustainable food systems in our urban environment. A few months ago, we completed 15 demolitions as part of a FEMA buyout and flood mitigation project. Most of those properties were in a cluster south of Susquehanna Street, just a few blocks from City Hall.

This new green space will not sit idle. When the weather breaks, the City will partner with VINES — Volunteers Improving Neighborhood Environments — to expand their urban farm to more than two acres with a lease of City property and \$20,000 in program support from City Hall.

VINES runs a farm share for low-income residents, provides summer employment for youth and creates beautiful community gardens on vacant land. The urban farm expansion will be a visible representation to the community of the creative solutions we can advance for flood-prone areas to make them more resilient.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Of any elected position in America, it's mayors who have the most diverse challenges when it comes to infrastructure.

For many residents, infrastructure means fixing neighborhoods streets, which are important. But City Hall has to think about infrastructure as much more. There are water and sewer utilities, parking facilities, street lighting, flood walls, pump stations and so many assets that need attention.

Significant streets projects this year include a significant portion of Broad Avenue, Highland Avenue, Cypress Street, Doubleday Street and Larchmont Road, among many others.

Phase Two of the Lincoln Avenue reconstruction will finish this year.

Other upcoming neighborhood projects include rehabilitation of the Conklin Avenue and Belden Street bridges over Pierce Creek on the South Side, demolition of the pedestrian walkways over Water and State streets downtown, and pedestrian safety improvements along Main Street on the West Side as part of the Main Street Corridor Study.

State Street from Susquehanna Street to Hawley Street will have new pavement, signals, and bike lanes, safer pedestrian crossings, and enhanced landscaping in 2019. The project will begin in April and transform a key gateway to our downtown from Binghamton University and the South Side.

And yes, the long-awaited \$6 million Front Street Gateway Project will be finished in June.

BINGHAMTON-JOHNSON CITY JOINT SEWAGE TREATMENT PLANT

The Binghamton-Johnson City Joint Sewage Treatment Plant is one of the largest and most complex infrastructure projects ever undertaken in Broome County. It's also our area's number one environmental issue. After scraping a flawed plan on the books when I took office, the new plant will be substantially complete by the end of this year.

This new facility should have been built long before I took office. Had a new plant been built 15 years ago, the cost would have been approximately \$75 million less. If we waited to build a new plant 15 years from now, the cost could be \$350 million, not including interest.

This community is well aware of the massive rate increases that accompanied decades of Band-Aid repairs, poor patch jobs, lawsuits and so on. From 2006 through 2013, before I took office, City water and sewer rates increased by 87 percent and 72 percent, respectively. And what did we get for those massive increases? No new plant, no significant repairs, no equipment upgrades. It was a bad deal for residents.

The total cost of this new plant is roughly \$275 million dollars. It will be paid through FEMA reimbursements, lawsuit settlements and ratepayers from 10 municipalities and Binghamton University.

There will be sewer rate increases to help pay for this project, but this time, ratepayers will get a brand new plant in return with expanded capacity to accommodate future regional growth and economic development opportunities. The plant will ensure discharge entering the river is the cleanest it's ever been, and for the first time since the plant has been in operation, it will comply with federal environmental protection laws. The plant will finally meet standards when it comes to protecting water quality and ecosystems in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed.

FLOOD WALLS

The future of Binghamton's flood protection is also a focal point on our list of infrastructure priorities.

Binghamton, Broome County and local towns and villages have been working with FEMA to inspect and certify floodwalls and levees throughout the Southern Tier.

This process, known as the Levee Analysis and Mapping Procedures (LAMP) initiative, is a crucial part of the federal government's review and adoption of new flood maps. In short, inspecting and certifying floodwalls and levees will prevent costly, and frankly unaffordable, increases in flood insurance for many homeowners who live in flood-prone areas.

For Binghamton, we anticipate the cost to be more than \$1.6 million to certify the seven miles of floodwalls and levees. We've been proactive and created an \$800,000 reserve fund for the certification process. We'll add to this reserve moving forward. I am not aware of any other municipality that is actively allocating funds in anticipation of these reports and certification projects.

We will begin the certification process once we receive a final report from the Army Corps of Engineers, which we hope to receive this year.

FLASH FLOODING

Many residents are also impacted by flash flooding. Just ask East Side neighbors who last summer watched helplessly as nothing short of a river flowed down Upper Court Street after a downpour.

Working with President Tom Scanlon, the City commissioned a study to identify ways to reduce future flash flooding and make East Side neighborhoods safer for residents. We received preliminary results this week, which call for building a new pump station near the Moeller Street drainage area.

This concept has been talked about for decades, but no one has taken action until now. In the coming months, President Scanlon and I will update East Side residents about new plans to get this pump station built and finally provide relief for those who have been affected by flooding far too often for far too long.

YOUTH

Investing in Binghamton's future is about so much more than taking care of City facilities, roads and bridges. It's also about investing in our young people.

When I took office five years ago, the City's approach to youth services essentially amounted to one employee in one office with a small budget. It was called "The Youth Bureau," but in reality, the resources it had didn't come close to what was needed.

Our young people deserved better. So, we made changes. These are just some of the programs.

In partnership with the United Way of Broome County, we started a backpack and school supply program to ensure no child in Binghamton begins the year without the basic tools he or she needs to succeed. Since 2017, the program has provided more than a thousand backpacks filled with supplies to students, at no cost to their families.

We've invested heavily in our parks. We advanced projects that include opening the region's first fully accessible playground, OurSpace, at Recreation Park, expanding Alfred Street Park on the South Side, and fully renovating the basketball courts at Columbus Park downtown.

But I know there is more work left to do. While we've increased access to critical after-school and summer programs, gaps remain. The City faces a staggering childhood poverty rate, with half our young people living below the poverty line.

That's why, tonight, I'm doubling down on the City's commitment to our youth and announcing a series of investments geared toward Binghamton's children and teenagers.

First is a new after-school program at the Lee Barta Community Center on the North Side. The Healthy Lifestyles Coalition After-School Enrichment Program will provide children with homework and reading help, mentoring services, STEM-based learning opportunities and more. Working with the school district, the program will target children in grades kindergarten to fifth not already enrolled in an after-school activity, helping to fill a gap in access to safe, meaningful opportunities for young people once they leave school.

The City is providing \$19,500 in Community Development Block Grant funding to support the program.

Community center staff are coordinating with Binghamton University and other partners to build the program. This is an example of collaboration at its best. When we finished the expansion project at the Lee Barta Community Center last year, this is what we envisioned.

Next, the City will provide \$20,000 in funding this year to the Boys & Girls Club Teen Center. This supports the Club's comprehensive homework help and tutoring program, exposes teens to volunteer opportunities and provides important workforce experience for youth.

Since before I was elected, parents and young people across the City have told me there aren't enough safe places in Binghamton for kids to spend time outside school. Our teenagers especially need better options on nights and weekends to keep them off the streets and out of unsafe situations.

That's why the City will invest \$45,000 to keep the Boys & Girls Club open hours later on Friday and Saturday nights, year round. Instead of closing at 7, the Club will use this funding to stay open until 11 p.m., giving our young people a safe place to take part in positive activities. At the end of each night, the teenagers will receive a safe ride home.

Every child and teen should have a welcoming place to spend time when school is out. In Binghamton that isn't always the case. But it can be.

Every major New York city has some type of civic community center for recreational and educational programs. Binghamton's youth are short-changed because we don't have our own youth center. We're proud to have expanded the Barta Center and added a community center at 47 North St. to serve struggling areas. But neither can provide the reach and impact a comprehensive youth center would.

Imagine what Binghamton would have looked like today if decades ago, City Hall saw the opportunity, maximized it and gave our youth every opportunity possible. I think a youth center back then would have made an impact on today's young adults.

That's why tonight I am announcing my intention to site and staff a fully operational City youth center by the time I leave office. With just under three years to go, this is a goal we can achieve.

The City will continue to fund programs at the Boys and Girls Club, Urban League, and others. That won't change. But I want to do more than ever before for our youth.

PARKS

Recreation Park on the West Side has often been referred to as the "crown jewel" of the City's park system. And rightfully so — with major investments over the years, it's a beautiful neighborhood park for thousands of West Siders, and visitors across the region.

Columbus Park in the heart of the City and serves some of our most underprivileged youth. There's a big difference between these two parks. Kids downtown deserve the same opportunities and park amenities families at Rec Park on the West Side enjoy.

Tonight I'm pleased to announce the City's next major park expansion project will take place downtown at Columbus Park. We're already seeking design experts to help us identify the next big park amenity, and we will host a public meeting in the next few months to solicit input.

Columbus Park's underutilized space and rundown areas will be upgraded. While most of Binghamton's parks have the same traditional features, like slides and swings, the new playground at Columbus Park will incorporate the more cutting-edge, adventure-oriented equipment in demand with today's kids.

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 of this valuable natural resource. I, along with our partners, will announce these exciting plans in the next few months, so stay tuned.

FINANCE

STATE AID

Last month, Governor Cuomo proposed eliminating state aid for 90 percent of New York's towns and villages.

In Broome County, the only municipalities not impacted were the City of Binghamton, Towns of Maine and Fenton and the Village of Lisle. If approved, the cuts would mean a loss of \$1.4 million for some 134,000 residents. Some towns and villages were looking at losing several hundreds of thousands of dollars which could have meant higher taxes, loss of services, job cuts or all of the above.

As a Vice President in the New York Conference of Mayors, I assembled a bipartisan group of Broome's mayors, town supervisors, and state representatives to speak in one voice about the impact of these cuts. We were the first in the State to take a public position. Shortly after our event, other regions followed with their own news conferences and advocacy efforts. We all urged the Governor to reconsider. And earlier this month the Governor did. He said the cuts would be restored, and state leaders are now discussing where the money will come from.

Even though Binghamton wasn't affected, as an officer in a statewide organization I felt a responsibility to help my fellow elected leaders and their constituents. I know what these cuts could do to our community.

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 a series of capital projects, the balance is more than \$16 million dollars, which is about \$8 million more than the day I took office.

We're growing our reserves while paying down debt, purchasing equipment up front to save bonding costs and refinancing city bonds to save on interest. Just next week, I'm sending to City Council legislation to refinance long term debt that will save taxpayers a half million dollars over the next 11 years. These types of cost saving measures add up and help us provide tax relief to residents.

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. It's 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 three years straight. I'm proud to say the City's property tax levy today is \$1.25 million less than the day I took office.

Tonight, I again make a public commitment to cuts taxes in the 2020 budget. This can only be done 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 Cliff have helped deliver annual tax relief to residents. Please join me in giving them a round of applause.

DEPARTMENT HEADS

It takes people like Chuck and Lori and many others for ideas to become real. I reflect on my gratitude for our team at City Hall. From the staff in my office to all department heads, we have civic-minded individuals working long hours on tough challenges to move this community forward.

They work to make progress in a number of disciplines — how to innovate workflows to pave streets and plow snow; how to protect and distribute our City's greatest natural resource, water; how to navigate complex legal frameworks to make public-private projects a reality; and how to guide the growth of neighborhoods and historic assets not just for our lives, but for generations a hundred years from now.

And at times it can be frustrating. And at times, some of the barbs in the political arena aimed at me hit these public servants as collateral damage. But they're undeterred.

I ask a lot of them, and their efforts sometimes go unnoticed. But not tonight. I thank every department head, City employee and member of this team who will make these plans tonight possible. Thank you.

CLOSING

As I conclude, I'm reminded this is the last State of the City presentation for Councilmembers Chris Papastrat and John Matzo, whose terms expire at the end of the year.

John and Chris both embody what it means to be a public servant in local government. They have a lot in common — they're both Southsiders and small business owners and both are dedicated fathers and family men. I'm proud to call both of them friends.

John and Chris also share that call to public service, a motivation to roll up their sleeves and get involved to help their community.

From advocating on matters of blight and infrastructure, to working collaboratively with neighbors to reduce crime, in now their eighth and final year on Council, they have represented the South Side well. Congratulations. You will be missed.

With Councilmembers Matzo and Papastrat term limited, two of our fellow citizens will step up to replace them. It will be a new City Council.

Personalities may change but our convictions should remain the same.

I will share with them the same message I've told this body and City Councils of the past. It's the message I shared door-to-door running for this office. And it's a message that our citizens have shown they support.

Binghamton must be focused on the future, not the past.

Through a belief in bipartisan cooperation, we've shaken the political gridlock that plagues Albany and Washington. We've rejected that ideas are defined as belonging to either Republicans or Democrats, and demonstrated the leadership to tackle tough issues facing this community.

And we'll get to that future, because we've shown progress is not only possible in local government — it's where you can get things done. Tonight, I'm pleased to tell you the State of our City is strong, and getting stronger every day.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you and goodnight!