

# State of the City of Ithaca 2019

The City of Ithaca municipal code dictates that the Mayor shall, at the beginning of each year, address Common Council with “respect to the needs and resources of the city, including such programs and proposals for the good of the city as he/she may wish to recommend.”

I am happy to report to you that the state of the City is strong. In an increasingly turbulent world, our small city continues to thrive and shine. Our residents have proven to be resilient, and our staff have proven to be brilliant.

In 2018 we have many examples of that resilience:

After years of budget deficits and property tax rate increases, we’re finally running budget surpluses and have decreased the tax rate in three of the last five years.

Our sales tax receipts increased – a testament to our entrepreneurs’ taking smart risks, our small business owners’ identifying and meeting demands, and our smart planning to meet this moment.

Our economy has become the envy of communities all over Upstate.

Crime is down over the last six years, the percentage of property in the city that is tax exempt continues to decrease, and people of all stripes – homeowners, developers and renters – continue to invest in every neighborhood in the City.

We’ve built a brand new water treatment facility, a new Commons, miles of new sidewalk and bridges.

We worked with the County to secure funding for the expansion of our airport, and the removal of the DOT site from our waterfront, which will pave the way for more people to live near the lake.

Our Youth employment service placed 182 teens in subsidized jobs, working a combined total of over 21,000 hours and earning over \$220,000.

45 YES teens were hired by private employers in the community as a result of YES services.

There are many people to thank for this success. Dozens of volunteers on our boards and commissions, the hundreds of staff in the City and the ten people on this council. Too many to name in any one speech.

But I’d like to name ten: the Department Heads of the City of Ithaca.

#### Leslyn McBean-Clairborne – GIAC Director

- Leslyn's clear eyed, big hearted, no nonsense leadership of GIAC continues to lead to incredible results and a sense of community unity that should be the envy of neighborhoods everywhere.
- In 2018 they set records, serving 800 area young people and their families. And the senior program served 170 senior citizens, an amazing 20 percent increase.

#### Liz Klohmann – Youth Bureau Director

- Liz's inclusive and compassionate leadership style makes every member of the Youth Bureau community – staff, the program participants, and their families – feel like they are in charge of the IYB. She models a deeply empathetic approach that has led to incredible results.
- 33 Brand new matches made in Big Brothers/ Big Sisters for a total of 96 matches and more than 8,000 total match hours.
- Big Brothers/ Big Sisters was a recipient of My Brother's Keeper grant money and joined the MBK initiative in Ithaca. Partnerships were formed and strengthened with many Cornell groups, such as Ujaama, Black Students United, Alpha Phi Alpha and Omega Psi Phi. Eighteen new matches between children and adults of color were made.

#### Ari Lavine – City Attorney

- A fiercely smart, and smartly fierce attorney – there is no one you'd rather have on your side. It is partly a shame that one of the ways his job works, is that if he is doing it well – as he always is – the public will never know just the scale of the disasters he avoids. Council knows some of what the City Attorney's Office – under Ari's leadership – accomplishes. The lawsuits won, the lawsuits avoided, and the brilliant legal strategies that balance the scales.
- Obtained multi-million dollar commitment from NYSEG to underground utilities on College Ave.
- Led task force and executed legislation increasing the Stormwater User Fee.
- Negotiated Ezra's Tunnel MOU through execution.
- Coordinated Green Street inter-city bus fees and associated legal issues.
- Supported efforts to reduce ~\$700,000 price for purchase of streetlights from NYSEG.

#### Chief Tom Parsons – Ithaca Fire Department

- The Chief is someone with an encyclopedic knowledge about fire-fighting. His deep expertise has led him to a firm commitment that the best way to fight fires is to prevent

fires. The Chief continues to bring excellent leadership on this front – including in 2018 adopting and enforcing regulations for food trucks.

- The Chief's knowledge isn't limited to firefighting though. Tom knows everything about some things, and something about everything. And his compassion runs as deep. That was why he was the perfect person to lead the task force on the Jungle that is considering all options in 2019 for how to increase safety and decrease suffering for the homeless population.

#### Julie Holcomb – City Clerk and Director of Public Information and Technology

- No one knows more about the City of Ithaca and its government than Julie Holcomb. And no one else serves as effectively as the glue that holds the many diverse and varied departments in the City together. From her work on special events – to the staffing and supporting of many meetings – Julie is an all-purpose fixer.
- Which fits her role. Julie is one of the three department heads that we asked to lead a merged department. And she has performed above the call of duty in a department that is crucially important, mostly because of the support it provides to the other departments and outside agencies. Upgrading equipment, modernizing the City's communications, and onboarding the new public information position in 2018 will continue to pay dividends.
- Julie hired and trained our new Public Information Specialist. They launched numerous public education campaigns (E. State Street sewer replacement project; "I learned about my City" presentation for summer students; Swift911; bus station relocation; etc.)

#### Steve Thayer – City Controller and Director of the Finance Department

- Steve is perhaps the hardest working city employee. He is as relentless as he is steady. Steve is one of the first to arrive in the morning and one of the last to leave at night.
- Always helpful to his fellow departments and never wavering in his commitment to both deliver for City employees and for his fellow city residents – Steve's voice is the leading reason why the City's fiscal position has seen such a remarkable turnaround.

#### Schelley Michell- Nunn – Director of Human Resources

- Schelley has an unwavering commitment to developing a diverse team in the City of Ithaca. That is because she knows this truth: that the more diverse a workforce we have, the more resilient a workforce we will have. Diversity and inclusion is not just a nice thing – it is a source of our strength and success.

Under her leadership in 2018, the HR Department

- Designed and delivered Equity and Inclusion training to the four Commissions
- Identified and secured a new EAP provider at one third the cost of the current provider with more expansive services
- Proposed and received approval for a fair and equitable management compensation plan for 2019
- Implemented a successful partnership with Cornell University Johnson Business School to offer Cornell expertise and knowledge to the City workforce, LEADBold offers monthly workshops and an opportunity to receive a certificate
- Collaborated with IYB to rewrite Background Investigation Policy and Procedures for seasonal staff
- Online application program fully implemented – currently application rate is 77% online

#### JoAnn Cornish – Director of Planning, Building and Economic Development

- I believe that when the history of the City of Ithaca is written, JoAnn Cornish will stand astride the pages of the text like a titan. She is one of the department heads who was asked to lead a merged department – and has done an incredible job of merging cultures while driving the city towards a smart growth, infill model that has led to a healthy economy and a more sustainable future.

Among the successes in 2018:

- Coordinated the review of 29 development projects equaling \$192 million in investment, 98 housing units, of which 12 are affordable, and 37,278 SF of Commercial Space
- Completed construction and sale of two Habitat for Humanity homes at 208-210 Third Street
- Completed rehabilitation of 98 affordable INHS rental housing units at scattered sites
- Completed the 210 Hancock Street project providing 59 affordable rental units and 7 for-sale homes.
- Delivered loan assistance to INHS to rehabilitate and reconstruct 29 affordable rental housing units at scattered sites

#### Mike Thorne – Superintendent of the Department of Public Works

- Has brought a thoughtful – some would even say brainy – analytical and professional leadership to the Department of Public Works. He is a systems thinker, but practical enough to know how to get work done on the ground.
- Mike's rethinking of the department's budget and reformation of our organization has led to successful innovations like the stormwater district, the sidewalk improvement

district, and the recently improved doubling of our street crew and the addition of a new water and sewer crew.

#### Chief Pete Tyler – Ithaca Police Department

- Chief Tyler has among the most serious jobs in the City – and his jocular easy going demeanor belies just how seriously he takes it. He knows that the Department is what keeps our city safe. The Chief would like more officers, and the police union would like a contract – we’re working through difficult but fruitful negotiations right now – but the IPD continues to deliver community oriented policing.
- Not only is the crime rate falling, but their outreach was evidenced this year by nothing more so than their tactful outreach to the Jewish community of Ithaca following the anti-Semitic Tree of Life shootings in Pittsburgh. IPD’s professionalism and diligence, as well as their compassion, was noticed and appreciated.

They’ve fought to make positive things happen for the people of this City – and they’ve done it on a shoe-string budget.

They work together – not always without arguments. They are passionate about their work, and when a group of passionate dedicated people decide to work as a team, you can expect some minor conflicts. Dan Cogan, our fearless Chief of Staff, has helped steer the group through discord and disagreement and get the best out of each and every department. We’ve developed a mind meld over the last two years – something that is not easy with a mind like mine – and the steadiness of his character and brilliance of his work have helped our organization reach higher heights.

All these people are fighting, not just for excellent results, but for more equitable results. They understand that too often the game is rigged for the wealthiest, but in ways big and small they fight to help tip the scales and make it easier for average people and normal families to live in the City of Ithaca.

So - the sun is shining on the City of Ithaca. It’s not time to celebrate – it’s time to make hay.

That axiom – to make hay while the sun shines – is not just an encouragement about striking while the iron is hot. (Please forgive the mixed metaphor.) It’s not just about taking advantage of opportunity. It’s about recognizing that not all our days will be sunny. That the turbulence that surrounds our City could also disrupt it.

Wild fluctuations of the stock market in 2018 should concern us all. They remind me of the bounces we saw in 2008 that preceded the worst recession in generations – and necessitated a belt tightening effort in the City of Ithaca that our infrastructure and personnel are only now recovering from.

Climate change is accelerating, which is threatening lives, damaging property and destroying entire economies. And our federal government is not just failing to act – it's actively taking us backwards.

That's because we have a regressive, unstable President leading a radically conservative and largely incompetent administration. An administration that has allowed the federal government to shut down three times in the last year.

Closer to home, our state, and our state government, are both poised for a fascinating eventful year. Among the many reforms we might expect out of Albany this year, a number will have a direct bearing on our lives here in Ithaca.

If the Governor approves overdose prevention sites, we should be prepared to use this innovation to save the lives of the most vulnerable opiate users in our community.

With a more representative state senate than we've seen in decades, we should prepare to fight for long overdue changes in the New York State budget. We will fight, through associations like NYCOM, for changes to increase the state aid that municipalities receive, increase CHIPS highway funding to fill potholes, and to adjust the formula for aid so that cities like ours that are disproportionately impacted by tax-exempt non-profits would get a more fair deal.

Also at the state level, the legalization of marijuana would bring enormous benefits and opportunities for the City. From tax receipts to the diminishment of unsafe underground economies, we should be prepared to capitalize on this newly regulated industry, while being aware of the pitfalls and injustices that could come from a completely unregulated approach.

And there is the distinct possibility that the State will join in an unprecedented and enormous investment in Collegetown. A development that could fulfill the goals of our comprehensive plan: a more robust 365-day a year economy in Collegetown, improved infrastructure, diversity of housing and uses on East Hill and more. This kind of diversity – just like a diversified investment portfolio – could help us weather future storms. And I welcome it – with some conditions.

A project of the size that we've heard rumored could exacerbate the most dangerous trend in the City of Ithaca today: the displacement of middle-class and poor people due to high rents and high taxes.

This recognition is why Council – led by Seph Murtagh and the Planning Committee – wisely raised the standard for tax abatements in Ithaca. Now projects must include affordable housing in order to be recommended.

It is also why Council and the Ithaca Urban Renewal Agency have been working to build affordable housing on site of the Green Street garage. The chosen developer will be working to rebuild our aging parking garage while also adding 200 units of affordable housing.

We should apply this same standard to whatever large project is developed in Collegetown:

First, the project should remain on the tax rolls. We already have too much tax exempt property. A new project should contribute – and in so doing should relieve the burden on everyone else.

Second, the project should be attractive. For a project as large as the one we could see, Council and the Planning board will have the highest expectations for quality, thoughtful design.

And third, the project should contribute to affordable housing. If not directly on site, the City should insist on a financial contribution that is not in the tens, or hundreds of thousands – but in the millions.

What else:

- We should build more quality affordable housing in the City
- We should allow home/property owners to build accessory/infill units to offset rising property taxes and help with maintenance costs, so they can provide critically needed housing while helping people stay in their homes
  - But! We should develop guidelines so that infill housing compliments, rather than degrades the neighborhood.
- We should codify the Green Building Code – taking the action that our federal government won't to reduce our local emissions.
- We will rebuild thousands of feet of linear sidewalk, including new sidewalk around Belle Sherman School, on Wood St, and along Elm/Chestnut
- We'll repair the draining on Hector, replace the culvert on Warren Place, rebuild Willow Avenue and Lake Street.
- We'll repave Auburn Street and West Spencer, Hook Place, Chestnut Street, and East State, MLK.
- We'll begin work to dredge Cascadilla Creek (using \$2M secured by our excellent Assemblywoman Barbara Lifton).

We should make hay while the sun shines. We should build a more prosperous, secure, resilient and interesting City – so that we can hand it down to the next generation.

To people like Kianna, age 15, who said that our Youth Employment Service, “helped me learn more about the process of getting a job as well as offering help whenever I needed it. I was given lots of information about how to be successful on the job, and any questions I had were answered.”

To people like Taylor, who said that he's changed since having his Big Brother. “I'm no longer that crazy 8-year old who had trouble in school. I am now a smart 14-year old who has a great deal of fortune ahead of him.”

For Kianna, for Taylor, and with thanks to all who work to make it this way – I am pleased to declare that the State of the City of Ithaca is strong.