



# Office of the Mayor

Matthew T. Ryan

## **Mayor Matt Ryan's 2007 Budget Address** *City Council Chambers* *September 11, 2006*

First of all, I have some people I would like to thank tonight. Many department heads have worked very hard with the Mayor's Office over the last several months to make my first budget process rewarding, enlightening, and comprehensive. We went through this budget line by line with a vision and a goal. We entered the budget process recognizing the tax burden our hardworking families already shoulder. We wanted to present a fair, responsible budget that reflects a hopeful promising vision and answers the needs expressed by residents that are currently going unmet in our community. This budget is a success on both accounts, in large part, thanks to the efforts of the department heads. Let's give them a round of applause.

From the very beginning of this administration, I have encouraged cooperation among departments and asked all personnel, from management to labor, to participate in a team approach to better serve our city's residents. This new approach has created a new energy at City Hall and I am so thankful that this administration can tap the talent and experience of city personnel to move Binghamton forward with direction and purpose. Together, in partnership with City Council, we can all make a difference. We **can** reclaim Binghamton's reputation as the home to innovation, as an upstate destination at the crossroads of opportunity.

A budget is a reflection of priorities and values. Of course, much of the budget is obligated to cover wages, benefits, utilities and equipment. However, there still remains a degree of latitude within the budget, and how one allocates resources must be informed by a vision and compelled by a particular set of values.

As I said, we entered this budget with a **very distinct vision**. It is a vision informed by the many concerns expressed by residents over neighborhood safety. It is a vision informed by the many ideas shared among department heads, city personnel, and members of City Council to streamline operations and reform government. It is a vision that balances our resources across a wide range of city services and needs. And it is a vision that is unafraid to make targeted investments around the needs identified by the members of this community, City Council and this administration.

From block to block and around the city, residents have expressed the need for government to be more responsive to their service requests, more efficient in their operations, and more attentive to their concerns over neighborhood safety. And this budget, OUR budget, is a response to those wishes.



# Office of the Mayor

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During a very successful first round of neighborhood assemblies, residents expressed a range of needs that, when taken together, remind us of the strategy needed to effectively improve neighborhood safety. From the Center City, we heard the desire for increased foot patrols by police officers. From the North Side, we listened to frustration over the multitude of blighted homes that threaten to destabilize the neighborhood and the continuing need for a grocery store. On the West Side, we heard residents express concern over the unmet needs of at-risk youth, and the illicit activity of tenants that goes unnoticed by absentee landlords. Residents on the East Side shared their worries over unlit street lamps and large stretches of dangerous roadways left in the dark. In the First Ward, residents wanted more attention paid to the disrepair of streets and how development of the many abandoned, industrial lots could strengthen an emerging small business district. And on the South Side, many residents have expressed worries about traffic patterns and the safety of school children around Benjamin Franklin School, as well as an interest to complement and improve the Southbridge commercial district with a mixed-use street level facility for parking and community-based activities.

These concerns, expressed by residents across this city, played a large role in shaping our vision and defining the central theme of this budget---**which is to balance our resources across a wide range of services and needs in order to improve neighborhood safety.**

An effective strategy for improved neighborhood safety obviously begins with a proactive, engaged law enforcement department. For close to a decade, the national trend among police forces is to improve visibility and community relations, to partner with residents to strengthen and stabilize neighborhoods against criminal activity and behavior. Chief Steven Tronovitch has shown excellent leadership in moving the Binghamton Police Department toward this community policing model, and I'm pleased that this budget does not compromise the department's ability to enforce the laws and safeguard our neighborhoods—last year there were 146 officers available for law enforcement activities, and this year there are 145. As many might recall, the city earlier this year was mandated by HUD to comply with federal regulations, and by doing that, risked losing four police officers. However, because of the reform and consolidation initiatives we've pursued this year, and because of the efficiencies built into this budget, we were able to retain and fully fund three of these officers.

We also had to fully fund one dog officer and our city's only zoning officer to comply with HUD's requirements regarding CDBG funds. We kept neighborhood safety as our focus, and accomplished all these goals with this budget.

Furthermore, we are making a small investment in a new Attendance Incentive Program for our crossing guards to ensure more efficient use of our police officers. In 2005, police officers were assigned to crosswalks for more than 500 hours. We anticipate this program will go a long way toward keeping our police officers out on the street, patrolling our neighborhoods.



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Removing blighted buildings and the problems that surround them will greatly improve the safety of our neighborhoods. This blight, and the saga over MBBA, has attained an almost folkloric status among residents—7 Mason on the East Side; 12 Winding Way in the First Ward; nearly half of Liberty Street over on the North Side. The days of inaction are no more, and the Removal of this blight will set the stage for renewal and revitalization.

Through the first several months of my administration, I was part of a chorus of upstate Mayors that lobbied Albany for action and support concerning the blight in our cities. Albany heard our pleas, and I thank our state elected officials for responding. Consequently, over the next three years, Albany's new \$300 million RESTORE NEW YORK initiative affords us a tremendous opportunity to make significant strides in removing these unsafe eyesores. In fact, later this week we will make an exciting announcement about the city's efforts to creatively address this crisis. And this budget—and the investments made therein—underscores our commitment to further capitalize on this hopeful opportunity of neighborhood revitalization and safety.

As we remove blight, we must also repair, rethink and renew our infrastructure. The need to better maintain our aging streets and sidewalks has been made clear by not only thousands of residents, but also a three and a half ton slab of concrete. Our neighborhoods demand better, and we will not compromise the safety of city residents and visitors by failing to make adequate investments in the years to come. Immediately, this budget begins to strengthen the capacity of our engineering and public works department, and addresses this serious threat to neighborhood safety in an intelligent, effective and productive manner.

But no matter how well we maintain the roadways and sidewalks, we must also keep them illuminated. After all, a well-lit neighborhood is a safe neighborhood. And that's why this budget allocates almost \$100,000 for our new initiative "**Light's On, Binghamton!**" This investment, we anticipate, will bring an end to the long-stretches of unsafe, dark corridors.

Finally, and rounding out our strategy for improved neighborhood safety, this budget also includes a targeted investment in our city's greatest asset—the youth. It is clear that the needs of so many children and young adults in our community are going unmet. We cannot deny there are broken homes. We cannot deny there is a shortage of positive, inspiring role models for young adults. The values of decency, compassion, and responsibility may go untaught to some of today's youth. But this administration and members of City Council refuse to accept any of these truths as reasons for doing nothing. The County's Youth Bureau, with its one full-time staff member, cannot adequately meet the needs of our city youth. Furthermore, the promise by the State to match the city's investment dollar for dollar is additional incentive to make this overdue commitment. This modest but significant investment of \$25,000 for youth development will not only improve neighborhood safety, but also send a clear signal to the children and young adults in this city—you matter, and we care.



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Just as we've listened to residents and Council members to inform our vision for next year's budget, so too have we listened to department heads, city personnel and municipal leaders elsewhere. As I first announced in my State of the City Address in February, government reform is a priority of this administration. Some successful small steps were taken by the previous administration, but it is time to take a more ambitious step toward implementing serious institutional and operational reform that will realize substantial savings and greatly improve our ability to serve all members in this community.

Since we adopted a budget from the previous administration, we were limited as to what capital needs we could address this first year—such as computers, software, and phones. However, as we prepared this budget, we granted departments the opportunity to request computer and software upgrades, and this budget answers those requests.

As for what we **could** do this year in regards to government reform, we were ambitious, determined and successful.

As promised, we successfully consolidated tax collection and enforcement to the County by September 1<sup>st</sup>, a move that produced some very real savings in both human and financial resources. And I would like to take this opportunity to thank the bipartisan effort at the County level for following the lead of our City Council in getting this transfer completed. As promised, we redesigned and launched the city's new website by July. As promised, we started digitizing all tax maps to integrate into the County's G.I.S. system, a powerful planning and development tool that no municipality can do without these days.

But there is much more to be done, and this budget reflects our commitment to continuing this government reform initiative with a more ambitious vision of what's possible, and a more compelling approach to operations and serving city residents. Next year we will begin a two-year project of rigorous analysis and a comprehensive overhaul of our IT capacity and systems. We plan to allocate \$75,000 annually until we fully integrate our data systems and move from a paper maze to a digital stream. We will rethink our billing operations, payroll operations, and grants administration. We will pursue electronic billing and payments of water and sewer services. And we will invest in our staff and train our workforce to fully reap the benefits of these substantial cost-saving technologies.

Because in the end, that's what it comes down to—the workforce. From the sanitation crews braving sleet and snow to haul away our garbage, to the firefighter and police officer who will risk life and limb to safeguard and protect others. From the clerks and assistants who hold together our offices, to the engineer inspecting concrete mix to ensure our roads are built safe and strong. From the lab technician monitoring the safety of our water to the underpaid, diligent Council members. The strength of this city will always be measured by the heart and ethic of its public servants. And once again I stress there is a lot of heart in



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# Office of the Mayor

Matthew T. Ryan

this committed group of public servants. A firm belief of this administration is that all hardwork should be fairly compensated, and I'm proud to say that this budget begins to reflect this basic, American principle. And as we move forward over the years, we will strengthen the partnership between labor and management and pursue beneficial arrangements in order to make public service more meaningful and more effective.

This administration inherited a City Hall whose ability to meet the needs of the residents was in question. The incremental cuts made over the years in both staff and services have come at a cost, and this administration will not impede progress nor compromise opportunity by pursuing the same approach. This administration accepts the challenge to ensure there is balance across the wide range of city services and needs in order to improve neighborhood safety.

The time to move our city forward with a coordinated and hopeful vision is now. The potential of our city is tremendous, and the ideas and concerns shared by residents and Council members have helped construct a vision that will tap that potential. It is a vision that gathers our resources around unmet needs that are threatening the safety of our neighborhoods. It is a proactive, ambitious vision that is compelled by hope and possibility. The hope of walking along a well-lit business district on the East Side. The hope of a North Side neighborhood removed of blight. The hope of downtown merchants for improved parking facilities and center city residents for increased police visibility. The hope among all parents that we as a community can better serve our youth and provide them with meaningful, safe recreation and an equal opportunity to succeed.

These hopes are underscored in this budget, and we have carefully invested our collective resources. I'm proud to announce that this rich vision of improved neighborhood safety and a more efficient and responsive government can be achieved for a very reasonable cost. This year's budget reflects modest increases, less than the consumer price index, in both homestead and non-homestead tax rates.

As we move forward in this budget process, we ask all members of City Council to look not just at the bottom line numbers. We ask Council to embrace this carefully crafted budget, a budget that answers the unmet needs of our community, and to consider the potential progress we can make as a city. This should be your guiding compass over the next few weeks of this budget process. I welcome the Council members to share and discuss this budget with their constituents. I'm confident that as this discussion unfolds, we will realize this vision for our city is a shared one, as is our faith in its potential.