



# Office of the Mayor

Matthew T. Ryan

## Mayor Matt Ryan's 2010 State of the City Address "Bold Reforms for Progressive Change"

*Binghamton City Council Chambers  
February 8, 2010*

Good evening, thank you for joining us and thank you for the privilege to address you tonight.

In considering the state of our City, I would like us also to consider the state of the communities that surround us. Consider the county, our State and our nation. Consider the world at large. For we are all part of an increasingly shrinking world. Our destinies are more closely linked than ever before. And as the worst recession in many decades has working families, businesses and all levels of government struggling to meet their needs, there is great frustration and anger growing among our citizens.

In 2008, the voters were promised change, but Washington and Albany are in gridlock as bad as we have ever seen. Partisanship continues to trump bold reform. The cost of two wars is approaching \$1 trillion and counting, while funding for infrastructure, housing, education and job training is being slashed and frozen. It is an uncertain time, an anxious time. And the architects of a system that has put 95% of the nation's wealth in the hands of less than 3% of the people will seek to reassure us that our system is just fine, that only minor adjustments are needed to help us "bounce back."

But bouncing back to a system that allows this unjust and obscene disparity to continue and expand is unacceptable. As individual citizens and as a community we cannot accept this reality. Instead, we must demand a commitment to the values of fairness and justice at every level of our society.

If there is a positive side to this economic meltdown, it is that the myth that financial deregulation works has been fully exposed for all to see. This presents an opportunity to foster a national conversation about creating an economic system that works for all the people, for Main Street rather than Wall Street.

While these may seem like heady issues too big for a small city mayor to consider, I would suggest tonight that mayors of cities large and small are precisely the individuals who understand the negative impacts of our unjust, trickle down, scramble for the remaining crumbs economy. We all must demand fundamental reform at the top.



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And at the local level, because of this broken system, we must be as creative and innovative as humanly possible. We must seize all the opportunities that come our way.

When I ran for Mayor in 2005, nobody could have known how deep the challenges would become. But I am here to tell you that I could not be prouder to be associated with so many individuals that have answered the call to action. To all my partners in City government, to all the members of City Council, to all the hard working members of my management team and to all the veteran Civil Servants of the City of Binghamton, thank you for all that you do throughout the year to care for our City and its residents.

This evening, I would like to highlight the positive changes that we have achieved already, and what we expect to realize in the months and years ahead. I would also like to discuss the recurring and increasing financial pressures facing the City, and how we will work together to continue to implement serious and sustainable solutions throughout all of city government. Despite difficult times, we have moved the City in the right direction, and with shared sacrifice the momentum we have gained will continue.

When we came into City Hall, we found significant operational deficiencies. We pledged to radically change how we do business in order to improve services, increase productivity and realize savings. We have accomplished those goals.

We have confronted head-on the longstanding issues of our aging housing stock and dangerously low homeownership rate by launching a comprehensive community development strategy. We are redeveloping and cleaning up more than 130 blighted properties citywide by leveraging over \$8 million in grants, creating new homeownership opportunities, preserving green spaces and attracting private investment. And for these efforts we have been recognized by NYCOM as being at the cutting edge of redevelopment strategies.

From the beginning, this administration has recognized that our growth would not be based on the brown, polluting economy of the past, but on a clean, green economy for the future. We positioned ourselves on the front edge of this movement by signing onto the Mayor's Climate Protection Agreement, reinstating the Shade Tree Commission, supporting the Smart Growth Commission, holding strategy summits on the green economy, expanding urban agriculture and developing the Binghamton Energy Efficient Program, a residential weatherization revolving loan fund that will begin receiving applications this coming summer.

We have already catalyzed significant economic development by recapitalizing the City's abandoned commercial loan fund. When we came into office, the Binghamton Local Development Corporation was on life support. Today, it breathes life into businesses across Binghamton, both downtown and throughout our neighborhoods. As we have seen, every dollar that the BLDC loans, leverages six dollars in private investment, and creates new jobs for our local workforce.



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Consider the new VMR plant at the former Landers site. The 150 living wage jobs created are now likely to double to 300 because of the special projects loans that were created to enable bigger projects such as this. Consider also the new North Side Grocery Store, which will open this fall thanks to a BLDC-loan, the investor John Hart and Save-A-Lot, Councilwoman Lea Webb, Broome County for contributing some Economic Development funds, Senator Malcolm Smith for his great help, our North Side Neighborhood Assembly and its members and the dedication of our committed citizens. Finally, for the first time in 15 years, area residents will have access to fresh foods at a cost they can afford.

There is no doubt that smart investments are essential to moving our City forward, and that principle certainly applies to our critical infrastructure. We inherited public assets that were sorely in need of care because there was no strategy for dedicating resources where they were needed most. We knew our work was cut out for us, and by bringing a spirit of bold reform, we have been able to upgrade our infrastructure in the most comprehensive, cost-effective way possible. Since then, Public Works has taken on a larger volume of work than any time in recent memory. Just take our 2009 Street Rehabilitation Program, which included more than \$27 million in projects, with the grand majority of the funds coming from federal and state sources.

Early on we recognized that neighborhood safety is more than just how big your police department is. It requires a comprehensive strategy of neighborhood development, removing blight, investing in our youth and adopting technologically sophisticated policing methods. This is exactly what we have delivered.

When I first ran for Mayor, our campaign's motto was "The People's Voice for a Change." Instead of governing in private on behalf of a few, we would push open the doors of City Hall so that everyone would have a seat at the table—everyone. We meant what we said and we have delivered, from the Neighborhood Assemblies to the Fiscal Management Commissions to an interactive City Hall website. I applaud all those who have contributed to the dialogue, but especially those who have taken action. Participatory democracy is the lifeblood of our community—of any community. It is the creative force that yields solutions that work for all of us, and we have embraced it fully and without reservation.

We have also been out in front for equity and justice, even when we were told it was too politically risky. In 2006, we launched the Diversity Task Force to strengthen affirmative action and equal opportunity in our hiring practices. Also in 2006, I raised the Pride Flag for the first time, and the following year I issued an executive order that the City would recognize same-sex marriages performed elsewhere. Last year, I joined the Council in urging the State legislature to support the Governor's marriage equality bill.



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Because of the teamwork concept we have fostered at City Hall, my first term scorecard is impressive. And thanks to the voters who expressed confidence in our vision for a second term, we are carrying this work forward with conviction and purpose.

Here is what residents can expect in 2010.

This year, we will continue to build our reputation as a nationally-recognized sustainable city, and advance many of the recommendations made in the Smart Growth Commission report. Our Climate Action Plan, currently under development with the help of community experts and volunteers, will be completed by September. And this year, we will introduce a package of zoning changes that will maintain the integrity of our Gateway districts, expand our urban forests, limit green spaces from being paved over, and discourage construction on our steepest slopes to protect our neighborhoods from flash flooding. We will roll-out a new Affordable Green Homes program, and when public dollars are involved, we will build only energy efficient homes. We will support and expand urban agriculture. Finally, this year we will join with our community partners to develop and introduce the first Summer Green Job Youth Corp, where we will train our youth in the jobs of tomorrow.

This year, we will push ahead with our Brownfield Opportunity Area planning initiatives in the First Ward, North Side, and Brandywine Corridor, advancing blueprints that will transform brown, vacant sites into green, mixed-use corridors of commerce, recreation, clean industries, and housing.

This year, we will move aggressively to implement many of the recommendations of the Commission on Housing and Homeownership report. First, we will rethink our housing investment strategies. For example, we will introduce a new grant program to encourage police officers and firefighters to move back into the City, helping to stabilize neighborhoods in transition. Second, we will refocus our code enforcement efforts, on creating safe, sanitary and structurally sound housing for all our residents, of every economic stratum. Third, we will work with Council to develop and introduce a citywide rental registration program so we can better protect tenants, and the investments of our responsible landlords. Finally, we will fully support the legislative compromises reached by students, landlords, and homeowners, and once and for all end the debate over what constitutes a functional family equivalent.

This year, we will continue to advance policy and take actions that achieve our equity and justice goals. First, in order to better prepare our police officers for work in a community that is growing more diverse, we are adding race-sensitivity to an already rigorous and professional training curriculum. And second, I want to announce tonight that we are re-dedicating the entire Chenango River Trail, from the Court Street Bridge to Otsiningo Park, as the Peacemakers Trail. Going forward, I will require that every trail enhancement along this corridor, from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s statue at one end to a memorial garden that celebrates local Peacemakers at the other end, connect to this central theme. We have enough memorials to wars. It is time we honor our peacemakers.



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This year, we will finally see major infrastructure projects go forward—both the Court Street Gateway Project and the Southside Commons project will begin this year—and Public Works will again responsibly manage tens of millions of dollars in annual repairs to our roads, curbs, parks, street lights, parking facilities and water and sewer infrastructure.

But despite operations that are more efficient and work crews that are better trained and more productive, maintaining our public assets will be a major challenge over the next few years. Last month, I directed my managers to develop a multi-year capital plan that reduces, substantially, our debt service over the next five years without neglecting our basic maintenance needs. It will not be easy and they will need to be creative, but I have no doubt that my team—like they always have—will rise to this challenge.

The challenges we face are still very real and severe, and we must look for savings elsewhere as well.

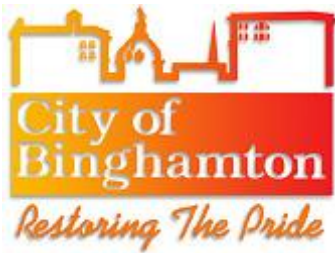
As is well-known, Binghamton has not been spared by the financial hardships sweeping our State and the entire country. Rather, they have compounded the severe, structural and recurring financial challenges that date back to 2002. It is the usual suspects. Health insurance costs rising an average of 14% each year. Pension costs going through the roof. And our revenues have not been close to keeping up.

We saw the economic storm clouds gathering early on, we sounded the alarm and we have put ourselves on a path to a more sustainable government. Our internal reforms are producing cost-savings. We negotiated greater health insurance contributions by CSEA and the Fire Union, while increasing management contributions to the same level. We introduced a new health insurance plan that will save even more for the City and our workforce. And we convened the Commission on Personnel Costs to develop responsible plans to eliminate vacant positions and right-size our departments. And we have done this almost entirely through attrition.

These were not easy decisions, and in facing them, we invited the participation of everyone involved: the Council, senior staff, citizens and our unions. While not all our labor units have answered the call, those who have responded are allowing us to ensure that any workforce reductions are as informed as possible.

In the Mayor's Office, we have led by example. We cut over 14% out of our office budget. We also went to the PPO, the more affordable health insurance plan.

And last month I introduced legislation that requires any new management team members to be under that plan. I would like to thank City Council for passing this legislation, which is now signed and in effect. We need our unions to join us in shouldering a small piece of the burden so that no one group must shoulder the entire load.



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City Hall is now 44 positions smaller than when we started, and four years from now, it will be smaller still. We will need to provide fire protection services with a smaller department. We will need to provide law enforcement services with leaner ranks. And we will need to provide Public Works services with reduced staffing. Our mission to achieve the right-size for City Hall will apply across our workforce. It is imperative that we find that balance, and we will not flinch in seeking it.

We are positioned to make these decisions without jeopardizing the community because of our bold, forward-thinking initiatives to improve neighborhood safety and upgrade our critical infrastructure. And I am privileged to work with a Council that is unafraid to make the right decisions for our community.

My goal is to right-size our government to a level that we can afford. It is not my goal to cut the workforce to the point where it starts to impact the important services we provide, and I want to emphasize again that our workers are our greatest assets. However, in these most difficult times it will take shared sacrifice from every part of our workforce to protect the level of services necessary to protect us all.

The greater the cooperation, the greater flexibility we will have to maintain our workforce. That is why the City Council and I will again be reaching out to ask our labor representatives for possible solutions to our extreme financial pressures. Whether it is moving to our more affordable health benefits plan, contributing more towards health insurance, mirroring management's wage freezes, accepting furloughs, taking early retirement or ensuring that new hires to all unions live in the City during the entire course of their employment—all options are on the table. And speaking of the necessary spirit of cooperation and sacrifice that will be essential for us to meet our fiscal challenges, just today our CSEA union signed a memorandum of understanding that will place all new hires in the PPO medical insurance plan, the cost-savings option. If all other unions followed suit, it has the potential to save the City hundreds of thousands of dollars, and I want to thank the CSEA for their leadership on this issue.

We will also aggressively seek other ways to resolve our financial crisis, including shared services with our neighboring municipalities. In fact, conversations about shared services with Johnson City have already begun. We will continue these talks, and if we can strike a reasonable agreement on any matter that will save both J.C. and Binghamton taxpayers money while still providing excellent services, we certainly will, with the approval of City Council and the Board of Trustees.

Just as our plan to right-size government will help reduce costs, we need a regional vision to increase revenues in the long-term. We are seeing that the provincialism of the past has reached a breaking point. It is a model that does not work. And as the economic circumstances compel us to work together as communities, one issue should not be avoided: Suburban Sprawl.



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Our urban communities have lost population over the last 30 years, and the County population has either stayed the same or slightly decreased. What has happened? Families have moved from the denser urban neighborhoods of Binghamton, J.C. and Endicott to the sprawling neighborhoods of Kirkwood, Chenango Forks, the Town of Binghamton and other outlying communities.

The end result is that, in the City, we have neighborhoods in decline; properties abandoned or carved up illegally into rental units; police, fire, and public works services that still need to be provided; and annual increase in taxes because of lost population. The end result for the County is more sprawl that adds more expensive infrastructure to build and maintain, and we all pay the price.

Let me echo a question often asked by my good friend Mark Bowers, a transportation planning expert: Why are we building a new senior housing complex out in the middle of nowhere when we have abandoned factories in Johnson City a stone's throw away from a major health care facility?

This has to stop.

Unfortunately, recent decisions have actually accelerated this damaging trend. Last year, the Town of Union re-zoned major tracts of land from agricultural use to residential use, setting the stage for more families to leave Binghamton, Johnson City and Endicott to expand the sprawl that requires the build-out and maintenance of more infrastructures we cannot afford.

This has to stop.

For the last six months, my administration has engaged many local stakeholders who share this concern. Advocates across all sectors recognize we need to develop a regional vision based on smarter planning practices that target growth in our urban cores and provide benefits to our smaller, rural areas.

This is not radical. And it is not unique to Binghamton. This planning framework is called Smart Growth, and it is endorsed by AARP, Office for Aging, Department of Health, our federal and state transportation agencies, Upstate Chambers of Commerce, Governor Patterson's administration and President Obama.

It is time we get on board.

I have directed my staff to start organizing a major Smart Growth Summit for this fall in an effort to jumpstart this regional discussion, and I hope the County can help lead and sustain this important dialogue in the coming years.



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Tonight I have discussed four years of bold reforms and accomplishments. While the politics of old are failing at the federal and state levels, we have taken a new, progressive approach to city government, it has set Binghamton up for success, and our future is bright.

In four years, downtown will be more vibrant than the downtown of old. The “College Suites of Binghamton Project,” the Midtown Mall Project and 20 Hawley Street, the former Marine Midland Building, will be home to hundreds of students. Because of each one of these student housing projects, and others like those built by Becky Gennet, our small businesses will continue to thrive, filling our storefronts and reclaiming our historic buildings. And hopefully the BU Law School will be a reality, closely tied to our justice hub, including the recently renovated Harvey Justice Building.

Downtown economic development will be made easier by all the new neighborhood residents who will support restaurants and boutiques that have and will continue to emerge. Our arts community will continue to make downtown Binghamton a destination, from First Friday to First Night. And the Court Street Gateway Project will be complete, welcoming residents, visitors and investors with refurbished and new features from the North Shore entrance to the Court Street Bridge.

In four years, we will have removed even more blight, restored even more of our aging homes and spurred even more housing starts, giving many more of our citizens and other working families new opportunities to realize the dream of homeownership—and at a cost they can afford. Our renovated parks, new green spaces and community gardens will give our young people recreational alternatives that are safe, healthy and educational. No side of town is without its eyesores, but every side of town will continue to see them turn from liabilities in to assets.

Economic development will increase as we further embrace our strengths, which include Binghamton University, BCC and Davis College. The ideas being incubated at the research facilities at BU will provide many of the jobs of the future. Already we see the goals of CIC2020 being realized as more and more students make Binghamton their permanent home. For their fresh set of eyes see—perhaps more clearly than some of us that have weathered all the adversity that a rust belt economy has left behind—the tremendous potential that our beautiful valley has to offer. It is still one of the greatest places to live, work and raise a family in the entire country.

So let us tonight resolve, as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once did, that there are times when we must substitute courage for caution. We live in such times, and our fervent prayer must be that we are all infused with the courage to do what is right and to do what is necessary.

Thank you and good night.