



Office of the Mayor

Matthew T. Ryan

Mayor Matt Ryan's 2007 State of the City Address *"Participation & Partnerships – Moving Forward Together"*

Wednesday, January 31, 2007

Good evening ladies and gentlemen, Council members, and all city residents.

This first year, we stayed true to the general philosophy that grounds this administration, which can be distilled to two words: "Participation, Partnerships." I recall a particular conversation I had with a few friends when I was first considering my candidacy. I was sharing with them my optimism, my thoughts on Binghamton's potential and renewing our reputation as the Home to Innovation, and they said, "You sound like the right guy to do all that." I was surprised they missed my point. "If you think Binghamton can be brought back by the Mayor alone," I told them, "then you don't understand my reason for wanting to run." The vision of this administration is not about me, it's not about you—it's about us, working together, to move this city forward.

I've always felt that local government needs to be the vehicle that allows us to respond as a community. And after a year in which we faced unprecedented challenges, I can speak with great pride about our community's character. I've always said this is a small city with a huge heart, and the response that followed the floods in June and November are a reminder of our potential, when we act together with courage, compassion and charity.

I am proud of our first responders in the police, fire and public works departments. They met these extraordinary events with poise and professionalism. They worked tirelessly to protect lives and property. Their selfless acts across the greater Binghamton area will be remembered for years to come, and I applaud them for their courage.

I am proud of the residents and city employees who gave up their fourth of July Weekend to help with immediate relief efforts. Over three days, our flood relief coordinator, Daphne Gathers, organized and dispatched more than forty teams to assist those most vulnerable in the community. These volunteers ended up cleaning approximately 50 homes, and I applaud their compassion.

I am proud of the amazing relief efforts organized by community agencies, and how our partners at the United Way, Salvation Army and Red Cross became the inspiration around which a large network of relief organizations coordinated efforts. The important work of this coalition continues under the name BAND, and I applaud their charity.

There still is much work to be done, and we must act responsibly and compassionately to ensure we fully recover from this emergency. New Orleans is a reminder of the injustices and human suffering needlessly



Office of the Mayor

Matthew T. Ryan

caused by a government that fails to adapt to a crisis and take recovery efforts seriously. This administration will not abandon its residents. We will commit our resources wisely to repair the flood damage, address the safety hazards that remain in our neighborhoods, and pursue flood mitigation projects where appropriate.

Handling the flood repairs and pushing forward with a hopeful vision for long-term and sustained success is a tall order, but we are up to the challenge. The report card from our first year is in, and it shows great progress.

We promised an open government that would work in partnership with engaged residents, and through the Assemblies we've achieved that.

We promised to consolidate services to the County in seven months, and we achieved that.

We promised to create a youth bureau to better serve the unmet needs of youth in our community, and we achieved that.

We promised to bring together members of academics, arts, and business communities to coordinate downtown development, and through the Main Street Program, we've achieved that.

We promised to rethink the website as an important democratic tool in better serving the community, and we fulfilled that.

We promised to continue waterfront development, and with new monies secured for trail expansion on the Susquehanna, these efforts are well underway.

We identified weaknesses in government operations, and concentrated our efforts to reform them.

We listened to the needs of residents, and mobilized resources to meet them.

We worked hard to create a City Hall that cares less for politics, and more for principles. A City Hall that bothers less with partisanship, and more with partnerships. A City Hall that will not abandon the people for power, but actually empower the people.

Tonight I want to talk in more detail about the great progress we've made together. I want to review our accomplishments this past year, reiterate the key themes of this administration, and then position our plans and initiatives of 2007 in the broader context of improving neighborhood safety and restoring the pride and vitality in our community.



Office of the Mayor

Matthew T. Ryan

GOVERNMENT REFORM

In last year's State of the City address, we identified internal government reform as one of our early and immediate priorities. The efficient inner workings of City Hall are essential, and when we came into City Hall, we were surprised to find out the Mayor's Office had no voicemail. Our Code Officers were using software popular during the 1980s. Department heads never met regularly. We discovered there were insufficient safety and training programs for our public works employees. The city's website was dull and uninformative. There was no comprehensive strategy for capital projects. And while other municipalities in Broome County had some information mapped on the County's online GIS, Binghamton appeared as a black hole, as if it didn't exist.

Much has changed in a year.

We removed the barriers between departments, and introduced a project-team management style. Every Tuesday morning, since February, members from a range of departments can be found in conference rooms throughout City Hall working on particular projects. This new management style has ended the days of passing the problem from one department to the next, and the staff has embraced these effective work practices with professionalism and purpose.

As early as March, we began accelerating our plans to upgrade computers and software. And when we propose our budget later this year, it will include the necessary funds to bring every workstation in City Hall up to 21st century standards.

Accurate information, and reliable access to it, is the key to delivering constituent services effectively and responsibly. And the most valuable planning and development tool for municipal governments right now is a Geographical Information System, or GIS. We pledged to move forward with this initiative, and much progress has been made. When completed later this year, a GIS will give our management team a powerful new planning tool that will greatly enhance our ability to serve the community. It will also give prospective investors and developers the tools needed to make informed business decisions in our area.

At last year's State of the City Address, I promised to completely overhaul the city's website by July. We kept that promise, and redesigned a website around the themes of transparency, accountability and accessibility. We promise to continue improving this virtual City Hall over the next two years, so that citizens will come to view this as an indispensable tool, and prospective residents and investors will come to view Binghamton as a forward-thinking city with strong community pride.

In August, I tasked my management team with developing a comprehensive Capital Improvement Program to better identify which municipal assets need investments **before** they become safety hazards. As this has moved forward, it has become apparent that we will need to ask Council members to review and reconsider current legislation that may undermine this preventative approach. A three-ton slab of concrete that fell two stories from a downtown garage made real the dangers of a City Hall that for too



Office of the Mayor

Matthew T. Ryan

long operated without a comprehensive, proactive strategy. Where we invest capital funds should be dictated not by politics, but by where they are needed most in the community to keep our residents safe.

Also in August, we began to implement the first phase of a long-overdue safety and training program for our workers. In prior years, workers were expected to operate heavy machinery with little training, not only endangering our workforce, but also greatly increasing the likelihood of equipment damage. From 1995 to 2005, the city paid out more than four and a half million dollars in workers' compensation claims. An effective safety and training program will cut our long-term costs, improve workforce morale, and increase productivity. Our hard workers deserve more respect, and our taxpayers deserve a protected, productive workforce. Under new leadership, the Department of Public Works has made investing in our workforce a priority, and our partners at State agencies have already moved us miles ahead of where we once were, at no cost to the City of Binghamton. The Second Deputy Commissioner of Public Works, a position we proposed and Council approved, will ensure this program is strengthened and expanded. Tonight, I welcome Bill Reardon, whose years of experience in all phases of public works will make him a valuable member of our team.

And lastly, as promised, we worked diligently with our partners over at the County to push forward consolidation efforts. Over several years, there were mutterings about transferring just delinquent tax collection to the County. In seven months, we acted to consolidate all tax collection and enforcement services to the County. Talking is one thing, but showing the political will to get the job done is another. I'm proud of this successful consolidation story, and thanks are owed to the diligence of county and city officials as well as our partners on City Council and the bipartisan support of the County Legislature. I also feel that County Executive Barbara Fiala deserves special praise for keeping consolidation on the minds of all municipal leaders, and this administration will always be willing to explore these cost-saving agreements.

And managing costs is an absolute priority that we will continue to give our full attention. After a four year period in which property taxes for homeowners increased an average of more than 7% a year, we were proud to propose a budget with a modest 2.6% increase, well below CPI, while still making major investments in neighborhood safety and infrastructure issues that for years had been underfunded. Our responsible budget was helped by recent decisions made at both the County and the State, and we thank our partners at both levels of government for doing the right thing. However, if we want to attract families and capital and broaden the tax base, we cannot rely too heavily on these intergovernmental funds. These resources need to be leveraged to create a Binghamton that attracts jobs, capital, young professionals and families. As we move forward, I promise that every decision we make, every partnership we forge, every resource we use, will advance this goal of long-term, sustained fiscal health.

This is what we have done and will continue to do internally, to unlock the potential of City Hall. These government reform measures are nearly invisible to the community. They don't make for good press conferences, but they are absolutely essential. For too many years an otherwise dedicated and competent workforce has been compromised by operational inefficiencies. And a government that fails to emulate



Office of the Mayor

Matthew T. Ryan

the better practices of the private sector is a government that cannot serve its constituents with excellence. I am proud of the workers at City Hall. They welcomed our attention to these efforts, contributed meaningfully to the discussions, and embraced these internal changes as an opportunity to better accomplish our ultimate task—which is to serve the public with pride.

IMPROVING NEIGHBORHOOD SAFETY & RESTORING COMMUNITY VITALITY

Reforming how we operate internally is greatly enhancing how we operate within the community and improving our ability to respond to the expressed needs of our residents. This administration believes planning should be comprehensive planning and coordinated among public and private partners, and economic development should be pursued with community development. I've stated many times before that in order to restore community vitality, we would have to do two things:

First, we would make it very clear that a community rises or falls as one, and so greater participation from the community would be encouraged at all levels. To accomplish this, we would create forums in which residents could share with city officials their priorities and needs, and then invite residents to take a more active role in the planning and decision-making process of neighborhood development.

Second, we would need to forge strategic partnerships at all levels of government and with all community stakeholders. By doing this, we would dramatically improve government's capacity to leverage and invest public and private resources in a coordinated fashion to implement the residents' vision of improved neighborhood safety.

Participation and partnerships—this was our path forward to improving neighborhood safety and restoring community vitality. I'm pleased to report that on both fronts, we have made excellent progress.

More than 1000 residents participated in our civic engagement initiative, the Binghamton Neighborhood Assemblies Project. We made a simple promise to residents: That if they took the initiative to identify a need and then organized with neighbors around a creative solution, we would be there to assist.

Craig Thomas felt our rivers were underappreciated. He organized residents and small businesses around the idea of monthly River Crawls, and we partnered with them to make it a success.

Sue Hendry and Cathy Faffenbach saw the needs of too many neighborhood children going unmet. They organized west side neighbors, labor organizations and businesses around the idea of a summer program that would provide children with a daily lunch and safe, educational recreation, and we partnered with them to make it a success.

Michelle O'Loughlin and Renee Russell were frustrated with the amount of litter along many South Side streets. They organized residents around the idea of Clean Sweep Saturdays, and we partnered with them to make it a success.



Office of the Mayor

Matthew T. Ryan

Ed Crumb and Louise Kastner had a range of concerns about the safety of our infrastructure, particularly in and around the East Side. They organized residents around the idea of an Infrastructure Workgroup, and we partnered with them to make it a success.

Barry Blakeslee and Joe Kovarik, small business owners in the First Ward, still see great promise in a commercial corridor along Clinton Street. They organized merchants around the idea of reviving the First Ward Business Association, and we partnered with them to make it a success. These merchants have shown great community spirit in support of the Ray Family, flood victims, and our youth.

Mrs. Marshall has said for years that the North Side needs a grocery store, and she has organized all of us around this vital need. We have been partnering with residents, and there are some promising signs. I reaffirm my commitment to this goal, and promise to Mrs. Marshall and all NorthSiders that we will not stop until we cut the ribbon at a new neighborhood grocery store.

These partnerships, of course, will continue as we move into our second year, and we are eager to assist again as the next round of creative ideas emerge.

Given these early successes, we felt it was essential to build the capacity of this civic engagement initiative. Last summer, we applied for and won a three-year, nearly \$400,000 AmeriCorp-VISTA project award from the Corporation for National and Community Service to do just that. We promised residents we would mobilize and make available the tools and resources needed to accomplish their goals of improved neighborhood safety, and this grant award is a huge step in the right direction.

This seven-member VISTA team has already played a vital role in connecting residents with community, university and City Hall resources. Our Media Coordinator has been empowering youth and residents by teaching them media creation skills. Our Small Business Coordinator helped merchants organize a Small Business Roundtable in December. Our Beautification Coordinator is working with residents from Carlisle Apartments on a Community Garden. Our Research and Training Coordinator is organizing a workshop on Earned Income Tax Credits, to put real money in the pockets of low-income families. And our three Community Organizers have served excellently as front-line liaisons between residents and city government.

As resident participation increases and our partnerships grow, the potential of this collaboration becomes tremendous.

As we move forward in 2007 with this civic engagement initiative, we are looking to boost capacity in three ways so engaged residents have even more resources to accomplish their goals.

First, we will encourage more community stakeholders to understand the mutual benefits of gathering resources around neighborhood development. Just recently, our partners at NBT signed on as a sponsor of this initiative as part of its commitment to reinvest dollars in the neighborhoods they serve. I am proud of



Office of the Mayor

Matthew T. Ryan

NBT's commitment to this city and its residents, and I hope other financial institutions will see the mutual benefits of working with engaged residents to promote homeownership and strengthen commercial districts in our neighborhoods.

Second, we will be asking the Corporation for National and Community Service for additional VISTAs this second year to be assigned to other community organizations, such as Southern Tier Celebrates and the Binghamton Gang Prevention Program. Connecting art organizations and youth-servicing agencies to neighborhood development is a strategy that we feel addresses safety concerns on a multitude of levels.

Third, we will ask the Advisory Committee and the City Council to once again consider a Community Development Block Grant Budget that includes \$100,000 for Neighborhood Development Projects. A portion of these funds would be used to award mini-grants up to \$1000 for residents participating in the Neighborhood Assemblies who, in coordination with their neighbors, want to beautify a corner, or buy trash cans, or plant trees in a neighborhood park, or host a block party. The process will be totally transparent, fully accountable, and will give engaged residents a chance to invest community development dollars where they belong—in our neighborhoods. I ask the members of CDAC and City Council to approve this initiative.

Finally, we are kicking off 2007 with the First Annual Citywide Neighborhood Assembly at Binghamton High School, this Saturday, February 3rd, from 1:00 - 4:00pm. Residents and the VISTA team have done a great job planning for this event, and it will be an amazing day. Child care and food will be provided, so we encourage all families and residents to come on down and catch a better understanding of the enthusiasm generated by this civic engagement initiative, and how you can play a role in making your neighborhood a better place to live.

The successful first year of BNAP has given the residents a chance to more genuinely participate in the planning and democratic process of local government, and given us the chance to better learn what needs are going unmet in our community. From the Center City, we heard the general wish for a more visible and active police force, and the specific request for more foot patrols. From the North Side, we listened to frustration over the rows of blighted and boarded homes, and the continuing need for a grocery store. On the West Side, we heard residents express concern over energy costs 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 neighborhood park and the many abandoned, underutilized industrial lots. And on the South Side, many residents expressed worries about traffic patterns and safety around the elementary schools, as well as concerns over parking around the Southbridge commercial district.

Your priorities became our priorities, and our vision for a more vital community was directly informed by your expressed needs. We have a deep sense of gratitude for each and every participant in this process. Your participation and engagement has helped define more clearly the path we must walk together in



Office of the Mayor

Matthew T. Ryan

order to achieve our shared goals of improving neighborhood safety and restoring the vitality of our great City.

Events this past year remind us of what needs to be done in order for residents to truly feel safe. For sure, an effective strategy for improved neighborhood safety must include a well-trained, engaged police force that is respectful of, and respected by, all community members. However, having listened carefully to the needs of the citizens, it is apparent that law enforcement is just one component of a much more involved strategy. Even more, it is this administration's belief that a visible and proactive police force is best as the last line of defense against criminal activity. The front-line defenses against neighborhood crime are high homeownership rates, a well-maintained housing stock, a strong commercial district of diverse small businesses, clean parks and green common spaces, well-lit walkways, a properly maintained infrastructure, meaningful job opportunities with livable wages, and finally, an engaged citizenry invested both financially and spiritually in their neighborhood. And when a government fails to invest in all of these front-line defenses, it irresponsibly places an impossible burden on the police force. Just as our great armed forces alone can't bring democracy to a troubled country, our great police force alone can't revitalize troubled neighborhoods.

If we want to restore community vitality and improve neighborhood safety, we need to dramatically bolster our investments in blight prevention, infrastructure repairs, youth development, and community development.

The 2007 Budget was a step in the right direction, in which we began to restore fiscal balance across a wide range of city services. We reinstated key positions in certain departments and made targeted investments elsewhere, giving City Hall the tools and resources needed to begin strengthening these front-line defenses against neighborhood crime. What I've stated to my team many times since then, I want to repeat tonight to all community stakeholders: Every decision we make, every partnership we forge, every resource we use should and must advance this shared vision of improved neighborhood safety.

So first, I would like to outline the efforts we've made this past year, and then second, outline our new NEIGHBORHOOD PACT initiative. This PACT is our promise to the residents, an agreement that we will pursue these goals together. It is a comprehensive strategy that we intend to implement over the next five years to reclaim our neighborhoods and restore community vitality.

The first component of our NEIGHBORHOOD PACT initiative is law enforcement. The Binghamton Police Department remains one of the most qualified and best-equipped forces in the state. In fact, some local crime prevention strategies—like the Community Response Team—have been touted as models of excellence and emulated in other municipalities across the state. As Commissioner of Public Safety, I have a responsibility to Chief Tronovitch, his entire force, and all city residents, to sustain this success, and to provide Binghamton's police force with the resources and tools needed to safeguard the public and enforce the law. And when we lost federal funding for four police officers, we made a commitment to fully



Office of the Mayor

Matthew T. Ryan

fund and retain three of those officers out of the city's general fund. This investment made sure there would be the same number of officers on the street this year than last year.

The Center City Weed and Seed initiative has been an important source of crime prevention funds for the last four years. However, funding was nearly eliminated last year because officials at the United States Department of Justice questioned the direction in which the program was headed. My Office and Chief Tronovitch renewed the city's commitment to this initiative, and with our partners at Binghamton University's Center City Coordination Program and the Binghamton Housing Authority, and the very determined members of a great Steering Committee, we completely turned this initiative around. The Law Enforcement Coordinator in the United States Attorney's Office commended our efforts in a December letter, and the Center City Weed and Seed will be featured in next month's In-site Magazine, DOJ's official magazine for Weed and Seed success stories.

Binghamton remains a very safe community. However, we do have small pockets of isolated crime. Though we have scored successes this past year in the Center City area, we have seen crime migrate into those neighborhoods where the front-line defenses are weakest. That is why we announced in June our intention to apply to the Department of Justice for official recognition of a second weed and seed site. If awarded, nearly \$1 million of crime prevention funds would be targeted for neighborhoods that need it most.

The second critical component of our Neighborhood Pact Initiative is Blight Removal and Prevention. Like most upstate cities, Binghamton has an aging housing stock. We need to act aggressively to turn this potential liability into a lucrative asset. With Binghamton recently recognized as one of the most affordable housing markets in the nation, we must act now to preserve our housing stock's unique historical character, remove blight, incentivize redevelopment and rehabilitation, promote homeownership, and safeguard against irresponsible investors—both local and out-of-town—who want only to drain our community of resources and obstruct our plans for improved neighborhood safety.

We have been very involved in housing concerns this first year. The first project team we assembled in City Hall was our Housing and Code Team, which was charged with addressing many of the code concerns expressed by residents during the Neighborhood Assemblies. This team carefully reviewed the Absentee Landlord Registration Ordinance passed by Council in 2005, and proposed an amendment to strengthen enforcement. They also proposed a second ordinance, which Council approved, to get the city out of the property management business. The new law targets repeat violators of city code, and makes it cost prohibitive for irresponsible property owners to continue relying on the city for lawn care or snow removal. We will continue to move forward in partnership with City Council to strengthen the laws and our resolve when dealing with housing stock matters.

Having assembled this Housing and Code Team early turned out to be a very fortunate move. The teamwork generated by these early efforts put us at a distinct advantage when the State announced RESTORE NY, a new \$50 million blight removal initiative that was introduced by the Assembly. We



Office of the Mayor

Matthew T. Ryan

thank Assemblywoman Donna Lupardo and Senator Tom Libous for enabling this administration to better respond to the safety needs in our neighborhoods.

With only four weeks to prepare and submit applications, our Housing and Code Project Team immediately went to work, keeping in mind the many frustrations expressed by residents over notorious neighborhood eyesores. As many community members already know, we secured a whopping \$1.67 million award—one of the largest awards per capita in the state. With 26 properties slated for demolition, we will do in one year the amount of structures demolished over the last five. In just a few moments, I will explain how the Restore NY activity plays a pivotal role in our NEIGHBORHOOD PACT initiative.

Residents made it clear that removing blight is not enough. We must actively prevent it as well. Vacant properties and the problems that surround them may pose serious safety hazards to children and families in our neighborhoods. Worse, a vacant property will often become a den for criminal activity, and can quickly pull down the property value of adjacent parcels. What's more, by allowing some of the city's most beautiful historical buildings to stay idle for years, we risk losing significant redevelopment opportunities and increased tax revenues. We see examples throughout our city: the Masonic Temple, the Stone Opera House, the Tichner factory, American Cleaners, and of course, the O'Neil Building.

Preventing blight and incentivizing redevelopment is no easy challenge. However, a recent report by the US Conference of Mayors highlights 25 best practices in blight prevention, and after careful research and review, this administration is moving forward with strategies adapted to our specific needs. So tonight, I'd like to announce our new Blight Prevention Initiative, which consists of two components: smart legislation and effective enforcement.

This morning, I submitted a request for legislation titled the Vacant Property Registration Ordinance. Keeping an updated registry of vacant properties was first introduced in 2003 in Wilmington, Delaware, and has since been emulated in scores of municipalities across the country. Wilmington charges an annual registration fee that increases the longer a building sits idle, and in three years, the blight prevention effort decreased vacant buildings by 22%, and spurred more than \$15 million in new development. There are laws specific to New York State that we need to consider in implementing this new blight prevention effort, and this administration will work with our legal team and City Council to approve an ordinance that is legal, reasonable and effective.

However, even the smartest legislation is useless if the resources aren't available to enforce it. So we are also investing in a new Blight Prevention Coordinator position within the City's Code Department. The challenge of vacant properties involves a range of departments—code enforcement, zoning, legal, planning and housing, assessment, police, parks and IT. Those municipalities that have invested in a full-time staff member to coordinate city-wide prevention efforts have posted the greatest success, and Mayors from these cities have noted that a full-time coordinator is indispensable. Just recently, our code officers identified 75 commercial properties and 230 residential properties that are vacant. This important



Office of the Mayor

Matthew T. Ryan

preventative measure will make sure today's vacant properties don't become tomorrow's safety hazards. We are making this investment responsibly, and the cost of the Blight Prevention Coordinator will not be passed on to the taxpayers. We have identified and secured federal funds that will cover the annual salary and benefits of this new position, and we are eager to move forward immediately with this vital effort that responds to residents' wishes for improved neighborhood safety, and we invite City Council's support.

The third critical component of our Neighborhood Pact Initiative is Youth Development. Every year, we are losing one of the most important resources of our community—our youth. We also risk losing our youth to violence and harmful activities, and we must do a better job at providing them safe recreation, positive mentoring, and meaningful personal development. We need not fear youth culture, but engage it. We need to connect its idealism, its creativity, and its energy to community development. This past year, we saw what happens when young adults are trusted with leadership roles, and engaged in creative, meaningful ways to restore community pride. In partnership with Gang Prevention Program, and with Weed and Seed funds, our administration worked with a team of young adults that wanted to organize three community events in Columbus Park. These young adults did everything they needed to do—they secured city permits, conducted outreach, recruited sponsors and solicited donations, hosted a talent show, invited police officers, and fed nearly 500 attendees. Rather than being feared as a threat to neighborhood safety, here was a small team of young adults displaying responsible citizenship and serving as hopeful catalysts to safer, more livable neighborhoods. A few of these fine citizens are here tonight, and I'd like to ask them to stand so we can applaud their efforts.

In last year's State of the City, we promised to send a clear signal to our youth—that they matter, and we care. I'm pleased to report we kept that promise. We proposed and City Council approved the creation of a Municipal Youth Bureau. At a time when national statistics show an increase of juvenile crime; at a time when suicide among teens is alarmingly high; at a time when youth culture is bombarded by commercial images of sex and violence—a community's character is defined by how it meets the needs of its youth. Based on the richness and enthusiasm of the dialogue at the first meeting of the 23-member Youth Bureau Advisory Board, I can confidently state that our community's character is compassionate, strong, and noble. For the first time in Binghamton, we've created a forum in which every youth-serving agency is present to articulate a common vision and explore creative possibilities. It marks a new beginning with great promise, and we anticipate the collaborations that emerge from this initiative will play a vital role in the success of our NEIGHBORHOOD PACT initiative.

In addition to the creation of the youth bureau, the city has been working closely with County law enforcement officials and Beth Harrington, the Program Coordinator of Gang Prevention, on implementing a youth violence reduction planning grant. Through this grant collaboration, we were able to secure approximately \$30,000 of media equipment, and we plan to open and establish a Youth Media Center near the Binghamton High School. By connecting media creation to civic engagement, we not only offer youth the chance to learn and develop marketable skills, but instill in them a sense of pride and ownership as they make meaningful contributions to community development.



Office of the Mayor

Matthew T. Ryan

The fourth critical component of our Neighborhood Pact Initiative is Greening and Beautifying our Common Spaces. For ten years I taught environmental law instructor at Binghamton University, and I take very seriously our collective responsibility in protecting and preserving the beauty and wonder of our planet. What does this mean locally? It means we must work towards a more sustainable ethic in all our development and actions as a city. To that end, I would like to announce our Greening Innovation Initiative, which will move us closer to a greener, cleaner, more sustainable Binghamton as many residents have requested.

To this end, I have invited prominent community members to serve on an Ad-Hoc Shade Tree Commission. Similar to other municipal tree commissions, the volunteer board will recommend and implement tree management programs, advocate for increased green space and tree cover, and promote education and awareness about the benefits of trees. While we have unfortunately had to endure removal of some trees in and around State Street Park under orders from the Public Service Commission, this Shade Tree Commission will advocate and oversee planting projects in those areas and all over the city. Tonight, I am announcing a goal to increase our tree plantings by 10% each year through 2010, which will help restore the city's canopy that has never fully recovered from the elm-tree blight that hit the area several decades ago.

Second, as we make sure our parks and commons spaces more green, we must also make sure to keep them clean. So as part of our Greening Innovation Initiative, we are proposing \$100,000 in community development dollars to a Neighborhood Beautification Campaign. These funds will cover the costs of trash cans, improved signage, marketing, and city-wide litter teams headed by our city's youth. I ask the Community Development Advisory Committee and City Council to approve these funds.

Third, like many other forward-thinking municipalities, Binghamton must commit fully to a new ethic of sustainability, and this administration will lead by example. Where we can purchase green products, we will. Where we can build to green standards, we will. Where we can encourage green practices, we will. To help facilitate this transition towards sustainable practices, we have supported and endorsed the plans of Dick Rehberg, a retired BU professor, who is organizing a Sustainability Conference of Small Cities here in Binghamton.

Finally, talking green is easy, but I assure you this is not an empty gesture. In fact, we have been exploring energy research and development over the last eight months as a means to cut utility costs and implement more sustainable practices. In partnership with NYSEG, we are asking NYSERDA for a grant to study the feasibility of capturing and using methane gas, a byproduct of the sewage treatment process, as an alternative and free fuel source. Recovering methane from landfills or sewage plants has been done to great success throughout the world, and there is no reason not to emulate that success here in Binghamton. Consider what greening innovation would mean in this instance. The annual electricity costs at the plant can reach as high as \$1 million, and the methane that is produced is flared to the atmosphere. An on-site generator, fueled by our own waste, would dramatically cut not only our operating costs, but also the amount of toxic global warming gases released to the atmosphere. Given this



Office of the Mayor

Matthew T. Ryan

very real step in the green direction, I have submitted legislation this morning asking City Council to endorse the U.S. Mayor's Climate Protection Agreement, making Binghamton the 377th city to accept the ethical responsibility that the Bush administration has so far failed to assume, let alone acknowledge.

The fifth critical component of our Neighborhood Pact Initiative is infrastructure maintenance and renewal.

As Luke Day, the Commissioner of Public Works tells me daily, "Public works is the core of public safety." In the wake of our emergencies last year, it is hard to argue that assertion. I'm sure we all agree that maintaining and repairing our infrastructure is a critical responsibility of government that should never be compromised nor overlooked.

Unfortunately, years of neglect at the local, state and federal levels have created an infrastructure that can no longer be ignored. In 2005, the American Society of Civil Engineers scored the nation's infrastructure a D+, and concluded that investments needed over the next five years total approximately \$1.6 trillion. Meanwhile, a study issued earlier this month by Nobel-prize winning economist Joseph Stiglitz concluded that the costs of the Iraq War could top \$2 trillion. It is obvious that federal priorities are completely out of step with the security needs of small town America, and until those are re-evaluated, we will step up our efforts locally and do everything we can to safeguard our residents from the risks of an aging infrastructure.

So even before the November flash flood resulted in millions of new infrastructure damage, we proposed and Council approved strategic investments in the 2007 budget that would allow us to catch up for lost years and better attend to the infrastructure priorities in the community. With City Council approval, we reinstated vital positions in both engineering and public works departments. When residents asked why so many street lights reminded dim, we were surprised to find out that when the previous administration purchased our city street lights from NYSEG, the savings from no longer paying rent were not set aside to pay for maintenance, which became our responsibility after the sale. Consequently, we proposed and Council approved our "Lights On Binghamton!" initiative, investing an additional \$100,000 to the maintenance program, which we anticipate will help address these long-standing safety concerns of residents and motorists.

Despite all this progress, all these wise decisions, it is no longer enough. Unfortunately, only days after the final 2007 budget was adopted, the November 16 flash flood introduced a whopping set of new challenges and demanded a major re-evaluation of priorities. The infrastructure challenges we faced prior to the flood were a tall order. The challenges we now face are extraordinary. We are up for the task, but we will need the cooperation of our partners on City Council if we hope to adequately address this emergency. This is a crisis that cannot be underestimated, and now is the time for true leadership on City Council.

As of tonight, here is what we know: Most repair work will be eligible for reimbursement. We have prioritized the repair work based on safety concerns, and we are proceeding down the list as quickly as



Office of the Mayor

Matthew T. Ryan

we can. We know that some areas of the city have expressed interest in flood and hazard mitigation projects. All mitigation projects must first be conceived in detail, and then submitted to FEMA for approval before any work can begin. After we complete the more urgent repair work, we will then consider mitigation projects as our resources allow. We have been urged by FEMA to complete all work in 18 months, since most municipalities will be competing for the same relief dollars.

We should be doing everything possible to make sure these repairs are done in a timely manner, and that the bills do not become the responsibility of our already financially stressed working families.

We cannot underestimate the amount of repair work that has now been added to the annual maintenance we must perform to keep our residents safe and our community moving forward. To give an example, the engineering department each year usually prepares, plans and oversees approximately \$5-6 million in infrastructure projects. The bills from the flood damage alone might total that amount. To expect the engineering department to double its workload without providing them any additional help is irresponsible and wrong.

Listen to Matthew Holbrook, a resident on the South side who lives along Bayless Creek. He said it very wisely: "Clean out the creeks and the debris and I'll feel a lot safer." Responding to this emergency is a matter of neighborhood safety, and that is exactly why I vetoed using the little emergency funds we have for something other than flood repair. Contingency funds are best used for emergencies, and I thank the Council members who understood the context of this important decision and ask them to uphold my veto. I am calling on those members who disagreed with my veto to rethink your decisions and provide us the tools needed to answer the call for help from your constituents by supporting our flood recovery plans.

First, we are asking support for legislation submitted this morning requesting the use of \$55,000 from the contingency account to hire a FEMA coordinator. Brian Kessler, who is the current City Engineer, will transition over to this role. He has been involved in the flood repair work from the start, and he has an unmatched knowledge of our city's infrastructure, having worked as City Engineer for many years under a previous administration.

Second, with Brian moving over to focus on FEMA work, we are bringing in a new City Engineer with an expertise in water and sewer systems.

Finally, we have the rare opportunity to fill the reinstated Senior Engineer position with a highly qualified engineer who has years of experience with street design and construction. We will need City Council's support in recruiting and retaining this excellent candidate.

Taken together, these moves will give the City a highly competent leadership team in the Engineering Department by March. With their combined expertise in water systems, street construction, and the city's infrastructure, we will be in a very strong position to follow-through with millions in flood repairs



Office of the Mayor

Matthew T. Ryan

without compromising other essential infrastructure projects and annual maintenance programs. More importantly, we will have the resources needed to ensure the millions in repair bills are not passed on to the taxpayers, and instead reimbursed by federal and state agencies. I ask City Council to give this recovery plan its full support, and to pass these important bills without delay.

SUMMARY- NEIGHBORHOOD PACT INITIATIVE

The ongoing efforts and new investments I just outlined indicate a great deal of activity and attention to the needs expressed by residents in revitalizing and stabilizing our neighborhoods. But the many years of departments working independently of each other and public investments being scattered across the city have not been enough to restore community vitality. So tonight we want to make clear that our **Neighborhood Pact Initiative** is three-fold. First, we promise a more focused attention to all of these front-line defenses against neighborhood crime. Second, we promise a massive concentration and coordination of public and private resources in particular neighborhoods immediately and all neighborhoods over time. Third, we promise to always connect these efforts to the Neighborhood Assemblies, so that the investments we make reflect the wishes of residents and small businesses in the area. Here is a map that indicates the areas we identified for targeted and coordinated investments.

The Restore NY grant has given us three clusters around which we will plan more extensive development. For instance, knocking down the blighted homes around Liberty Street will be just the beginning of our revitalization efforts in this action area. As part of our Neighborhood Pact Initiative, we will look to coordinate private and public investments in civic engagement initiatives. We will include greening and beautification efforts, infrastructure and parks improvements, youth development, commercial development, and crime prevention strategies in all our efforts. And we will always turn to the residents engaged through the assemblies process for direction and guidance.

This is not to say that other sections of the city will be excluded. Absolutely not. However, public policy decisions should not be made in a vacuum, and there is overwhelming consensus among professional planners, policy makers and municipal leaders that **concentrated** public and private investments in a **particular** place accrues substantial benefits. Building our neighborhood defenses must be done in a focused, comprehensive manner, and this strategy will give us greatest hope for sustained success.

We are making our Neighborhood Pact Initiative known to all community stakeholders, since we all have a role to play, and a contribution to make.

This vision has been presented to the BLDC to better coordinate commercial development.

It has been presented to the Community Development Advisory Committee to better coordinate community development.

It has been presented to the Youth Bureau members, to better coordinate youth development.



Office of the Mayor

Matthew T. Ryan

It has been presented to all department heads to better coordinate services and the deployment of resources.

It will be presented to Community Housing Development Organizations, Southern Tier Homebuilders Association and other housing partners to better coordinate housing development.

It will be presented to our partners in the non-profit sector to coordinate programmatic activity and essential services.

It will be shared with our elected officials at the County and State levels.

And we will present it over and over again to every private and public partner that comes to understand the incredible potential of this great community.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

An open, responsible government effectively planning and investing in improved neighborhood safety creates a climate that will attract and retain investment, jobs, families, and young professionals. As Governor Spitzer noted in his State of the State Address, "In the innovation economy, investment and jobs will flow only to those areas that are safe and vibrant places to live and work." That is exactly why implementing a comprehensive vision of restored community vitality is the right path forward to successful development. Making New York State a more business-friendly climate is the responsibility of our elected officials in Albany, and there are promising signs. Making Binghamton a more vital community with safer neighborhoods is the responsibility of all of us, and using downtown as an indicator, there are promising signs.

Many investors are remodeling empty downtown apartments to beautiful loft spaces, and many residents are now calling the urban core home.

The responsible investments at the Press Building and the spectacular renovations of the Kilmer building extend the wonderful work done by the Court Street Development Group.

The new \$29million Binghamton University Center is on schedule to open in August.

Our downtown business community has expanded—Dillingers is our new anchor at the south end of State Street, and The Night Eagle Café is our new anchor at the north end.

We've seen the addition of Mad Moose Saloon, a gorgeous new lounge, and The Art Mission Theatre promises to complement our flourishing arts scene.



Office of the Mayor

Matthew T. Ryan

Investments in our downtown infrastructure continue with our partners at the County, Binghamton Metropolitan Transportation Study, and DOT, with the Court Street Gateway Project and the Intermodal Transport Terminal beginning as soon as this summer.

Waterfront Development continues, with a trail extension north to Cheri Lindsey Park and construction of a new trail along the Susquehanna River.

The Binghamton Local Development Corporation has come alive, and leveraged in eight months close to \$1 million in private investment, a 260% increase over all of 2005.

More than forty downtown leaders have made a commitment to move the Main Street initiative forward, and there is a strong sense of responsibility to a shared common vision.

We are retaining jobs in the urban core, and attracting new ones. Coughlin and Gerhart just announced their relocation to the Press Building, encompassing four floors and keeping more than 90 professional jobs in our urban core. AVRE shifted facilities and has plans for expansion. Paiker and Lyons relocated to Hawley Street. Pyramid Brokerage and SEFCU have recently moved to Court Street. Knovel, described as the Google for science engineers, has doubled. The former site of BING WINGS, an important corner in the Center City, will soon see an impressive \$800,000 facelift as Manley plans a new initiative, a new type of downtown market. All this new activity has translated into a good year for Boscovs, and their faith in our downtown has been renewed. And there are many exciting announcements in the near future that will have a dramatic impact on the downtown district.

We are a city on the move. As a young person said to me recently while he was home visiting his family, "Binghamton has a spring in its step again, and I'm thinking of returning after college." It is more than just our step. Our hopes have been lifted, our pride restored, our common vision renewed. The State of our City has strengthened over this past year for one reason only: because together, we are choosing to make it that way. As citizens we are choosing to be more engaged. As partners we are choosing to be more committed. As an administration, we will always choose to be more inclusive and responsive. As Mayor, I could not be prouder. My optimism has held true—the potential of our city is tremendous, and our greatest resource is its residents. It truly is an honor to serve this community, and I look forward to another promising year of participation and partnerships—another year of us, working together to achieve our shared goals of safer neighborhoods and a more vital community.

I would like to invite everybody to a short reception to follow in the Second Floor Gallery. Thank you for your time and your patience, and good night.