

Wednesday, February 15, 2006, City Council Chambers

Mayor Ryan's 2006 State of the City Address
"Restoring the Pride"

These first few weeks I've come to learn how so many at City Hall are hard-working and committed. They tackle their work with enthusiasm, and they do an excellent job serving the public. I thank all of them for their spirit and diligence, but tonight, I want to acknowledge John Butler in particular. He has given this community over thirty-years of dedication, and we are sorry to be losing him to Vestal. We wish him the best of luck with his endeavors, and on behalf of the community, I thank you John for your service to Binghamton.

Members of the City Council, honored guests, friends and family, citizens of Binghamton, I am honored and humbled to stand before you to present the 2006 State of the City address.

There is general consensus that our city is at a critical juncture. Some worry of uncertainty and change. However, I see change as opportunity. We are a city with incredible potential. We are situated at the intersection of three major routes of commerce and tourism, and at the confluence of the Chenango and Susquehanna rivers. We have unique assets and beautiful natural resources. We have a population steeped in the traditions of diligence, innovation, and diversity. Tonight, while I am pleased to announce that the State of the City is strong, I take even more pleasure to announce and explain the great promise that lies ahead for our community.

Since the first of the year, I have opened and cultivated channels of communication with City Council members, County Executive Fiala, Senator Libous, Assemblywoman Lupardo, as well as our federal representatives. I have met with members of the Chamber of Commerce and the downtown business and arts associations. I have reached out to key figures from all our educational institutions. I have listened to the ideas of many business leaders, local neighborhood associations, labor groups, and faith communities. I have traveled to Albany with mayors from across the state; and to Washington to meet some of the nation's most forward-thinking mayors.

It has been a rich and rewarding beginning, and with every conversation, I've come to learn that there are many who share my hopeful vision for Binghamton. Even better, I've learned that many are also willing and ready to participate in restoring our community's pride. So tonight, I'd like to briefly outline the priorities and principles that my administration will be built around, and then explain some specific initiatives

that we will pursue this year. I hope for a spirit of cooperation and collaboration with City Council, all elected officials, and community partners so we can successfully move our great city forward.

The last twenty years for Binghamton have not been easy. With the departure of key manufacturing industries and suburban sprawl, our population has plunged by almost 20%. The effects have been troubling. Employment opportunities have dwindled. Blight and boarded homes are increasing in number in certain neighborhoods. And of course, the tax burden has shifted to fewer homes, forcing many hardworking families to make decisions they shouldn't have to.

We must realize, however, that these challenges are not unique to Binghamton, and the effects of a global economy have spared no City in the North East. What's more, municipal governments from Crescent City, California to Eastport, Maine have been saddled with the skyrocketing costs of pension payments and health care. Add to this mix a federal government that is out of step with the needs of our communities, and it becomes increasingly clear that municipalities, in order to flourish, must embrace a far more innovative and flexible approach to governance.

When it comes to economic development, we must acknowledge that neither City Hall nor the private sector alone can address the challenges we face. We must understand that each entity brings to economic development unique resources and tools. The key to great success is collaboration. One powerful tool that the City has for too long underutilized, is the Binghamton Local Development Corporation, the BLDC. Hundreds of cities across this nation have witnessed great success under administrations that have used local development corporations as economic engines of growth. The numbers don't lie, and from Tacoma to Cleveland to Burlington, local development corporations are facilitating growth and expansion with dramatic results. I intend to mimic that model of success here in Binghamton.

But when it comes to public-private partnerships for economic development, there is an even more significant task City Hall must assume: the construction and maintenance of an infrastructure that meets the needs of private commerce—of 21st century commerce. Our entire nation's infrastructure is aging and in disrepair. And since our federal government continues to neglect our urgent domestic needs and chooses instead to divert incredible resources to dubious policies overseas, it is incumbent upon municipalities to make much needed investments to maintain a quality of living and compete for private investment.

And the competition is fierce. Every community from the west coast to the midlands to the east coast is pegging renewal on the same hopes: all are trying to attract industries of the high-tech sector and the creative economy. It is one thing to make this promise, it is

another thing to make it happen. We have to realize that the only communities that will actually experience renewal will be those bold enough to invest today in an infrastructure that meets the specific needs of tomorrow's economy. Capitol projects for this summer were selected by the previous administration, but next year and beyond, many capital projects will reflect the ambition and scope that I think is necessary to accommodate the changing needs of the new economy.

Finally, in regards to economic development, my administration will give serious attention to the vision outlined in the city's Comprehensive Plan, which City Council approved in May 2003. It's time to pull this plan off the shelf, and implement some of the more creative proposals so that the potential of our community is fully realized.

Take for instance the Waterfront Trails Initiative. The latest research clearly shows that waterfront redevelopments are perhaps the most successful investments a city can make toward revitalization. From Chattanooga, Tennessee, to Chester, Pennsylvania, to Peekskill, New York, to Bangor, Maine, cities are turning back to our precious waterways and re-invigorating local economies.

The WaterFront Center, a national not-for-profit center that promotes wise and sustainable waterfront development, explains that, "Waterfronts often represent the best opportunity for community enhancement and enrichment and that planning should be long-range, comprehensive and holistic." So I applaud the previous administration for having the insight and courage to ignore the critics and for driving this visionary project forward.

What my administration will lend to this initiative, is to ensure that any proposed development, from Confluence Park to Ostiningo Park, in no way undermines this valuable asset. I ask the public, private investors, City Council and our state and federal officials to embrace the opportunity this corridor affords our community. Standing alone this water trail is only a corridor of recreation. However, if we all work together, we can strategically target investments to line this trail with specialty shops, niche retail, and entertainment venues—just like many other communities have done, to great success.

And what makes this stretch of development from Confluence Park to Ostiningo Park so important, is that it includes the Binghamton Plaza. Right now, this plaza projects an image of disrepair and neglect to more than a million commuters and tourists who pass by every year. I pledge to change that.

Picture how a Binghamton Plaza, fully restored and turned around, linked to an improved Cheri Lindsay Park, would project an image of renewal. We could lure hundreds of commuters and visitors to our city every month. I have already begun conversations with the plaza owners, and my administration will work diligently to

ensure that these plans move forward, and that any redevelopment is attentive to the needs and interests of the North side neighbors.

Those are the long-term, ambitious goals of my administration in economic development—working with City Council to unlock the potential of the BLDC; investing wisely in an upgraded, cutting-edge infrastructure to accommodate the new information-based economy; coordinating with community partners to ensure all development in and around critical zones is consistent with elements of the city's comprehensive plan.

I have also shared some short-term goals with members of the economic development department, and the team has embraced them with excitement. Facilitating the flow of private investment into the urban core is just one example. There remain hundreds of empty suites and vacant commercial sites throughout Binghamton, many of which go unnoticed by local entrepreneurs. Soon this will be a thing of the past. As early as tomorrow, residents will start to notice in and around downtown and along Clinton Street, marketing posters that will include information of BLDC loan programs and the agency's contact information for prospective tenants and buyers. This is a small initiative, but one that exemplifies how a proactive City Hall can make available to the private sector the tools and information it needs to drive economic expansion here in our community.

Another short term goal is to make sure that our city is no longer the only municipality in the entire County that isn't mapped under the G.I.S. system. Without going into great detail, this is a powerful tool for economic activity, and often the primary resource that out-of-town investors and firms use to locate sites for development. We must make available this information, and my staff has already moved forward with this goal.

But it's my firm belief that economic development must be linked to community development. That is, we must link a revitalized downtown core to a network of renewed neighborhoods. Link the creation of decent paying jobs to the creation of safe recreational areas. Link the rehabilitation of our infrastructure to the remediation of our natural resources and the removal of blight. Link job training for our youths to civic instruction for our youth. In other words, as we cultivate partnerships with the private sector for economic development, we will cultivate participation from our neighbors for community development.

The City logo now includes the phrase "Restoring the Pride." In the context of community development, this simple phrase becomes very relevant. It is time that we all realize how each and every one of us can, and must assume responsibility for the state of our City. If we begin to take greater pride in our block, our neighborhood, and

ultimately our City, we will quickly realize our collective potential and create a quality of living that will attract and retain families and young professionals.

To that end, tomorrow night, in partnership with Council members Chris Papastrat and Pat Russo, I will host the first of eight Neighborhood Assemblies at MacArthur School. These assemblies will provide neighbors with a public space to share and discuss our successes, concerns, and ideas. These assemblies will lay the groundwork for a more engaged and active citizenry that comes to trust City Hall and City Council as committed partners in the renewal of our neighborhoods. In attendance will be representatives from the public works department, the police department, and code enforcement to address the common concerns of street reconstruction, public safety, and blight. Additionally, my economic development team is preparing brochures customized for each neighborhood that list the properties available for development opportunities. My planning team is preparing a packet of the sections of our city's Comprehensive Plan that pertain to each neighborhood. My Housing team is putting together information packets regarding home ownership programs and funds that might be available to low-income residents for renovation projects.

From these examples you can see that these assemblies will be an opportunity for residents to embrace a new spirit of civic engagement, and for City Hall and City Council to embrace a more responsive and attentive approach to residents. The message I want to make very clear tonight to the residents of this great city is this: If you participate with a renewed energy, define a particular need or concern, and organize around a creative solution, my administration will make available the tools and information needed to realize your goals.

And tonight, to express my genuine commitment to this endeavor, I am announcing the "Neighborhood Partnership Fund." This year, I am making available a modest sum of \$4000, from which the eight neighborhood assemblies will be able to draw, in order to fund summer neighborhood projects that they choose to be most relevant, like extra plantings or benches in parks, small community gardens, youth activities, or outdoor murals. It is a small but meaningful beginning, and if neighbors take the initiative and work together to restore the pride, I promise to you that this administration will be there to assist.

Neighbors are not the only partners we hope to attract as we implement strategies for community development. Students at our educational centers have also expressed a great interest in working with my administration to improve how we serve the community. We have already placed interns in my office, the planning department, legal department, economic department, and personnel department. We are working with students and professors from Binghamton University, Broome Community College, Cornell, BOCES, and Binghamton High school. This spring and summer, two interns

will be working with the Police Department and Binghamton University's C3 program to help my administration develop a diversity initiative, because I am committed to having a workforce that properly reflects the diversity of our community. These internships emerged from a series of meetings my office hosted with educational leaders last month, and I intend to explore and expand this university-community partnership as we move forward.

In order to implement a more dynamic approach to governance, it is essential to also rethink the organizational structure and daily operations of City Hall. As we pledge to make City Hall more responsive and flexible, we obviously must perform a complete evaluation of operations and rethink resource allocation. This is why, in addition to economic and community development, I have chosen reorganization as a top priority for my first year. I pledge tonight that by next year at this time, City Hall will have a different look to it, and the organizational reform we implement will not only produce a City Hall that is more flexible and responsive, but it will also save tax dollars.

Yesterday, I announced the hiring of Justin Woods, a consultant who will conduct a thorough assessment of the two planning and development departments. The ultimate goal is to devise a model in which the two departments could be realigned to more effectively address our specific needs and better reflect my holistic approach to development. Not only did Justin come highly regarded by the Director of The Department of City and Regional Planning at Cornell University, one of the top ranked departments in planning and urban studies in the country, but he also brings to this endeavor over five years of administrative experience in municipal governance. He has great enthusiasm, and we're excited he accepted the challenge.

Re-evaluating the two planning and development departments is just one component of my organizational reform initiative. Because my administration is committed fully to a shared-services initiative that County Executive Barbara Fiala initiated last year, there will also be changes in the finance, data processing, and treasury departments. Binghamton is the only municipality in Broome County that collects its own taxes. I pledge tonight that after September 1 of this year, that no longer will be the case.

There is overwhelming consensus among Council members, County officials, and members of my staff, that the City could realize substantial savings by transferring all tax collections to the County without compromising the professional service residents have come to expect from our finance and treasury departments. What's more, pursuing this shared services initiative affords my administration a great opportunity to realign our limited human and financial resources to better suit a vision of City Hall as a proactive, attentive, and responsive partner to both the private sector and the citizens.

And if there's one constituency that I'd like to divert more resources to, it's our youth. They represent our greatest hope, and how we treat our children is a telling barometer of our commitment to our community and its future. We **can** do better, we **must** do better. With compassion and resolve, we must counsel them, share with them, educate them, engage them, listen to them. So as savings are realized by my reform initiative, I'd like to invest a portion of these resources toward the creation of a Youth Bureau here in City Hall. I have already begun conversations with State and County officials—with Denise Dyer and Beth Saxton—and will work toward creating a Youth Bureau by the first of next year. Sixty other municipalities in our state have a youth bureau, and these communities receive from the State one dollar for every dollar invested. Working in partnership, state and municipal leaders are showing the compassion and wisdom in investing in our most precious resource, our children. I hope to make Binghamton the 61st municipality. So I invite Council members and interested community members to join me as we explore this promising initiative.

I am pursuing the above reforms to make City Hall more responsive and attentive to community needs. I am also pursuing reforms to make City Hall more accessible and transparent to the community. Here is where the internet becomes a very useful tool, and already I've given this my complete attention. Last month we requested proposals and last week we awarded a contract for the complete re-design of the City website. I'm delighted that Cyber City, a locally-owned downtown firm, has been selected to help us bring our website into the 21st century.

I pledge tonight that no later than July 1, the City website will be a far more dynamic, interactive, and informative tool for residents and potential visitors. We will ensure that every form and application is available for download. We will look to make available all public databases for taxpayers and homeowners to access. We will work with Eric Denk, the City Clerk, to record all public meetings and council sessions in digital format to improve accessibility, increase transparency, reduce paper waste, and lower costs. We will look to allow online payments for permits and tickets. We will look to create an online grievance form so residents can submit and track concerns, over things like garbage collection, potholes, or code violations.

But because not everybody has access to the internet just yet, we will also look to establish a 311 system for residents to communicate immediate concerns and complaints. Similar to 911, this system would allow residents to call a central City Hall operator who would quickly answer the question if possible, or perform the necessary follow-up to ensure the concern is addressed courteously and the matter resolved. Just as with my other reform initiatives, my interest here is to dramatically improve the operations of City Hall, and to act more as an information and services center that the residents find accessible, responsive, and accountable.

Tonight, I have greatly enjoyed sharing with you my optimism, but it would be unwise to stand before you and not share some of my concerns. There are some serious challenges we face as a community.

This last year, there has been a string of violent activities, and the public is understandably concerned over public safety. While statistics show that crime rates are low, we must be ever diligent to ensure that the residents of Binghamton are protected and feel safe. Providing for residents a community that is free of crime and rich with opportunity is an essential service of City Hall and one that I take very seriously. My administration will work in partnership with City Council, local and county law enforcement officials, and neighborhood associations, to make this the safe city that citizens deserve.

However, I also want to remind our residents that crime moves into those areas where indifference and apathy dominate. That is why I have placed such significance on the neighborhood assemblies as a means to engage residents. It is why I've invited residents to assume responsibility for restoring the pride in our community. We must remember that when we reinvent our common spaces with creative activity—whether it's urban gardens, outdoor murals, community spaces, or recreational zones—we drive out criminal activity. And I intend to work with all the neighborhoods to remove blight when necessary and renovate where possible.

After all, a renewed neighborhood, with engaged residents participating in recreation and commerce, is the best defense against crime. And if anybody doesn't agree with that, I'd like them to consider the downtown area during First Fridays. When empty, the downtown is a place where some are afraid to venture at night, but every First Friday of the month when the art galleries are open and the cafes buzz with music and poetry, the place is magically reinvented, harking back to the glory days of Binghamton. This is when people feel safe.

Just as people shouldn't have to worry of crime, they shouldn't have to worry about our precious tax dollars being squandered. And this brings into focus the joint sewage treatment plant, a major and nagging concern for our whole region. For too long, a lack of candid and honest communication between all parties involved has compromised wise planning and efficient operations. I have urged all parties involved to honor the trust the taxpayers have placed in us. I will allow smart investments to improve waste treatment, but I will not allow massive sums of tax dollars to be wasted. The Board and plant operators have already expressed their gratitude over the immediate and consistent attention I have given this issue since day one, and I will continue to demand better communication, accountability, and cooperation from all parties involved, and I look forward to partnering with Mayor Lewis to achieve these goals.

This will be the tenor and tone of my administration: innovative, accountable, and responsive. I do not fear uncertainty and I welcome change as opportunity. I believe if we unleash the incredible resources and talent of both City Hall and our citizens, the possibilities are endless.

But to achieve greatness tomorrow, we have to act now.

The time is now, for each of us to assume responsibility for the City our children will inherit.

The time is now to restore our pride through active engagement and hopeful partnerships.

The time is now to cast aside indifference and cynicism.

As neighbors, residents, parents, and friends, the time is now to dream creatively and pursue our shared vision with resolve and courage.

There are examples of some city residents already moving in the right direction. Again, just consider the city center. After so many years of troubled times, the urban core has more recently experienced the stirrings of a renewal. Many don't seem to be aware of this, but I encourage residents to explore our downtown area, take a walk and see how the upper levels of our historic buildings are being renovated to living and business spaces. This transition has come about almost entirely by a coalition of entrepreneurs and artists, which includes members from the Downtown Binghamton Business Association, The Court Street Redevelopment Corporation, and the Gorgeous Washington Street Association to name just a few. This coalition simply cared too much for their hometown and who refused to be swayed or deterred by the doom and gloom rhetoric of the naysayers. Through the uncertain times, they have held firm to a vision of hope, inspiration, and opportunity, and the entire community has benefited greatly from their perseverance. For that, I ask you to join me for a brief moment tonight to applaud and thank them.

And on behalf of the community, I want to pledge to the organizers of First Fridays my active support for this monthly celebration. My administration will contribute the resources necessary to make this even more successful. There is no reason why we can't coordinate and schedule events at The Forum or The Arena or the University campus for first Saturday so we can draw hundreds to Binghamton for not just a few hours, but an entire weekend, filling our downtown hotels, restaurants, and shops.

Of course, as with any other agenda of reform and action, there will always be the doubters, the naysayers. We cannot allow the cynics to win the war of words. I can

imagine what the pundits might say tomorrow. If all of a sudden I could walk on water, they would be saying Mayor Ryan can't swim. We will not allow this attitude to prevail.

I intend to put forth politics and policies of a hopeful and progressive vision. It is this vision that will recreate Binghamton as a vital, dynamic destination. It is this vision that will ultimately attract and retain new families, young professionals, recent graduates, private investment, and lucrative new industries. And it is this vision that will compel my every decision.

The citizens I talk with are excited about change, and we as elected officials must embrace a can-do-spirit. If we ever hope to retain our youth and attract enough families to lessen our tax burden and renew our neighborhoods, we need to be ambitious and forward-thinking.

And if we accomplish these goals and stay true to this vision, we will attract back to our area the artistic and cultural creators like Ken Jenkins, a cello player who received two perfect scores at the New York State School Music Association, and who will perform in the upcoming production of Les Miserables.

We will retain our civic-minded leaders like Nasha Taylor, a recent Broome Community College graduate who last November received the Citizen of the Year Award by the Broome-Tioga NAACP chapter.

We will welcome back as neighbors the next generation of gifted innovators, like Daniel Alweis, a senior at Binghamton High School, recognized this year for his overall academic excellence as a National Merit Scholar Finalist.

And hopefully, our gifted stars, like Tateyana Parham, the recipient of this year's Boys and Girls Club Youth of the Year award, will come to always call Binghamton 'home.'

So promise me tonight you will share in the responsibility to restore the pride in our community. Promise me tonight you will partner with your neighbors to pursue the possibilities that await us. Promise me tonight you will join with my administration and city council in renewing our commitment and engagement. Together, if we walk forward with vision, grace, and humility—and if we keep to heart, the simple truth that our actions today will determine exactly what city our children will inherit tomorrow—I promise you that our community will come into greatness and prosperity.

Again, our state of the City is strong, but it could be much stronger. Our city is, and always will be, what we make of it. I look forward to working with you all so we can make Binghamton as strong as we know it can be. Thank you, and good night.