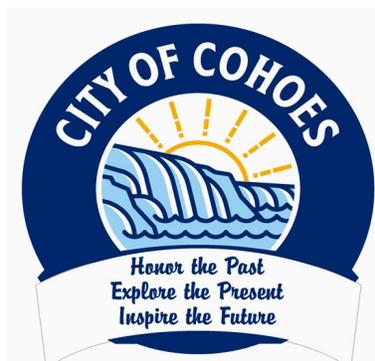


The Honorable Mayor William T . Keeler
presents the

2021 *State*
OF THE
CITY

A D D R E S S

Thursday, February 4, 2021



Cohoes Mayor Bill Keeler - 2021 State of the City Address

Thank you Laura, for that kind introduction, and for all you do for our youth and the diverse population of Cohoes. Thank you Reverend Kaitlyn Wood, for your invocation, and for your leadership at the United Church of Cohoes.

A special thanks also to Josie Parker and Rosalyn Annely - you two are wonderful examples of the awesome young people throughout the city who are helping to build a brighter future for Cohoes.

I am grateful to you all for being part of this 2021 virtual State of the City.

Much Has Changed....

A year ago, we gathered together at the Cohoes Senior Center for the 2020 State of the City.

Elected officials, senior citizens, students, business, civic, and religious leaders, city employees, and others in our community; greeting each other with handshakes and hugs. People settled into chairs packed tightly around tables. They stood shoulder to shoulder around the edges of the room.

I talked about our vision for the year ahead. I spoke of 150th anniversary plans for parades and festivals, and musical performances.

I outlined our agenda to be present at community breakfasts, and sporting events, and other gatherings to help people respond to the 2020 Census.

I talked about efforts underway for the city to seek state and federal grants for infrastructure, economic development, and more.

These days, none of that would make sense.

It is incredible to think about how much our city - and the entire world - has changed.

The fact that I am speaking with you today – virtually - rather than in person, is a clear reflection of that change.

On that day – February 10th 2020 – we did not yet know that Norlite had incinerated AFFF firefighting foam containing dangerous PFAS chemicals in our community.

We did not yet know that simmering social unrest would spill over into streets across the country, throughout New York, and in our area.

And we did not yet know that the COVID virus, with just a handful of recorded cases in the U.S., would spread across the globe and into our community, with unimaginable health and economic consequences.

With all that has happened during this last year, it would be an understatement to say that 2020 did not unfold as we had planned a year ago when I delivered my first State of the City address.

The State of Our City...

Typically, at some point in these annual addresses - sometimes in the beginning, maybe in the middle, or at the end - the Mayor declares that “the state of our city is strong.”

This is not a typical year.

There is no doubt that, just as in our families, our businesses, and in other communities locally, nationally, and globally: The **State of our City is stressed**; economically and personally.

But our resolve has never been stronger, and I would add that **the state of the city is also hopeful, creative, compassionate, resilient, undeterred, and united.**

As the saying goes, “It is not what happens to you that matters; what matters is how you respond to what happens to you.”

Inspiring City Workforce & Community Response to the Pandemic

I have been so proud, gratified, and inspired by the way our city workforce and so many of the people of Cohoes have come together as a community in response to the historic events of the last year.

Starting last spring, with efforts underway to slow the spread of the COVID-19 virus, countless volunteers helped package and distribute food to our seniors who were safer remaining in their apartments and homes. Volunteers also boxed up and distributed food to our neighbors who lost their jobs. We are extremely grateful to the Regional Food Bank of Northeastern New York, and all who donate to it. They all made it possible for us to organize 20 food distributions. More are scheduled in the weeks and months ahead.

There are so many unsung heroes of the pandemic in our community – people like Beth Slezak, director of the Senior Center, who worked with us to expand the number of our seniors receiving Meals-on-Wheels. Together, we made sure those meals were delivered - filled in the food gaps for those who did not qualify, and worked to find creative ways to help seniors deal with sudden isolation. Beth and the others deserve our gratitude.

This includes city employees. Even though periodically during this pandemic we’ve temporarily closed the doors to City Hall for everyone’s safety, staff have improvised to get the job done.

Our City Clerk’s office, Assessor, and Treasurer make sure residents are able to get essential public documents -- like marriage licenses.

Last summer, when almost everything was being canceled everywhere, Dan Hytko and our Recreation team managed to open and operate Lansing’s Pool, continue summer camps, and offer socially distanced yoga and other fitness programming out in the fresh air.

Because of the COVID pandemic we could not host the traditional Memorial Day and Veteran's Day ceremonies, so we improvised. With the help of Leo Falconio of the American Legion and many others, we hosted car parades to honor those who have served our country.

We had to find new ways to continue beloved traditions: The Easter egg hunt was transformed into a coloring contest. We promoted a Halloween home-decorating contest. The Turkey Trot went virtual. Instead of a Christmas tree lighting at city hall, we adorned our downtown with garlands and festive lighting. Cohoesians across the city lit up their homes as part of our holiday lights contest.

And throughout this pandemic, in ways large and small, neighbors have helped neighbors. A group of Cohoes volunteer sewers made hundreds of masks to donate. The Elks Club recognized the efforts of nurses at the Eddy with a delivery of gift bags. And our very own Josie Parker, who led us in the Pledge of Allegiance today, was a "Quarantine Fairy," delivering surprise packages to more than 140 doorsteps: ringing the bell, and leaving the surprise behind, not waiting for a thank you or recognition for her efforts to lift their spirits.

In the midst of the pandemic our community also responded to the social and racial unrest nationally by coming together for a peaceful march through the streets of Cohoes in June. I am encouraged by the thoughtful deliberations and dedication of the Cohoes Police Reform and Reinvention Committee as we seek to build closer ties between our police department and the community. And I thank our new Police Chief, Todd Waldin, Assistant Police Chief Tim Keefe, and the entire police force for their work day in and day out protecting our community, particularly during the pandemic, I am proud of the progress we are making on these important issues.

We can also point, with pride, to how our small businesses have collaborated together, and how the community has rallied around them, shopping local to help them survive during the pandemic.

Our Economic Development team transformed Restaurant Week into Take-Out Week, and the community responded.

Debbie Jacques had the inspired idea to close Remsen Street to traffic, let our restaurants pull their tables outside, and host Eat in the Streets on Friday nights. Again, the community responded.

And Thanksgiving weekend we celebrated Small Business Saturday with socially distanced open-air shopping downtown, and yet again the community responded.

Since January 2020 we have had 10 ribbon cuttings for Cohoes businesses, 8 of those during the pandemic. That is certainly bucking the national trend. Experts have taken note. In a recent speech reported in the Saratogian newspaper, Pete Bardunias of the Capital Region Chamber of Commerce praised Cohoes for our strong efforts in supporting new businesses. He said it was a source of inspiration. I am quoting him here:

"In my opinion, Cohoes set a great example in 2020 by bringing together interested parties at all levels to support business ventures that somehow managed to get off to a good start this past

year despite all the challenges, and the impact on economics, community, and morale was very tangible," he said. "This is something I hope Saratoga County communities can emulate."

Navigating the Fiscal Crisis in the COVID Recession

The economic challenges of the pandemic have been daunting, not just for our businesses, but for our families, and for city government.

In 2020 we confronted a \$1.4 million COVID-19-related drop in revenue.

This included a 20% shortfall in New York State aid payments equaling \$550,000 and an \$800,000 decline in County Sales Tax receipts. And we have budgeted for an equivalent revenue decline this year. Our meticulous City Comptroller, Mike Durocher, has been at his job for more than 20 years, and says he has never experienced a fiscal crisis like the COVID Recession.

On top of that, the city also incurred unexpected costs related to the retirement of eight (8) city employees, resulting in severance payments in excess of \$500,000. I appreciate Mike's budgetary expertise and meet daily with him as we seek to increase efficiencies for our taxpayers.

We took steps beginning in April 2020 to offset anticipated revenue losses.

We cancelled and then restructured the contracts for the Cohoes Music Hall to both save money - approximately \$250,000 - and to put this precious civic resource on more sound economic footing going forward.

We reduced payroll costs via attrition, furloughs, and layoffs;

And we took steps to contain overtime costs in all departments. I particularly want to thank the Cohoes Firefighters Union for engaging in good faith negotiations that resulted in a compromise on overtime costs that met our mutual goals of increasing safety while generating critically needed budget savings.

Our enacted 2021 budget is designed to guide the city through the economic fallout from the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The \$24.5-million budget for this year includes:

- a 2% cut in spending
- no increase in property tax rates,
- no increase in sewer and water rates, and
- no layoffs of city personnel

As I said when I introduced the proposal back in September: Just like every city across New York and around the country, the City of Cohoes and our residents are facing severe fiscal stress due to the COVID-19 pandemic. But we must not shift the city's budget burdens to households in the form of property tax increases or water and sewer rate hikes.

Instead, we are confronting this problem by operating under a leaner budget with improved efficiencies.

We are also aggressively pursuing Federal, State, and private grant funding. Although many grant programs were put on hold in 2020, we are preparing for anticipated new Federal and State infrastructure funding, support for clean energy projects, and other initiatives that are designed to jumpstart this COVID-19 economy.

Making Progress Despite the Pandemic

Let's be clear, despite the economic and logistical challenges of the pandemic, there is a lot that we were able to accomplish in 2020, and we have an aggressive "to-do" list for 2021.

Progress on Environmental Justice

On the Norlite issue, for example: Last February we learned that Norlite's parent company Tradebe had contracted with the U.S. Department of Defense and others to incinerate what we now know was nearly 2.5 million pounds of AFFF firefighting foam containing hazardous PFAS chemicals.

With the involvement of Federal, state, and local officials, city residents, outside experts, and advocates

- the DOD contract was cancelled,
- there is now a city and state ban on incinerating AFFF in our community, and
- efforts are underway to determine the health and environmental implications of the PFAS incineration and to more closely monitor all aspects of Norlite's operations.

Company officials have told me they want to be a good neighbor. As I told them, and am telling you, I will continue to work closely with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) and other relevant regulatory authorities, and the company, to ensure that Norlite becomes a better neighbor.

We have put a lot of effort into this issue in the last year. I appreciate the time, energy, and expertise of everyone who has helped guide us through the complex questions and concerns regarding the environmental health and safety issues related to the incineration of hazardous waste in our community.

Norlite's key state permits to operate are now up for renewal. Because Cohoes is located in an environmental justice area, this will include opportunities for increased community input. Dialogue between the company and the community will be very important. I encourage all residents and other stakeholders in our community to be involved.

Progress on Infrastructure

Infrastructure is another area where we have made good progress, and have great plans:

When I took office in January, 2020, I committed that our Administration would focus on infrastructure, and we are doing just that. This work is often not visible, and not flashy, but it is essential.

In addition to the basics of plowing the snow, picking up the garbage, and cleaning the streets, the Department of Public Works staff

- Cleaned out neglected catch basins to reduce flooding.
- They detected and repaired leaks in underground pipes, saving hundreds of thousands of gallons of water every day – which in turn saved the city money.
- Workers also patched leaky roofs and repaired broken windows.
- They did maintenance on heating and cooling systems to save energy in city buildings.
- They trimmed trees around the senior center to prevent damage to the roof.
- They cleared snow from sidewalks on school routes to make it safer for students walking, and they installed curb cuts to make it easier to cross streets.

The DPW also paved roads across the City. We will continue paving in the coming year, with a focus on roads that are in the most need and get the most traffic.

The DPW also did some housecleaning in 2020 – straightening up their garage and surrounding yard. Taxpayers will be happy to know that they sold unused items at auction, including a golf cart, and they recycled unusable materials as scrap. This project returned \$75,000 to the City treasury.

In his first year on the job, DPW Commissioner Steve Hennessey has worked tirelessly, often after normal business hours. I want to thank him and his team for their commitment to the upkeep of our community.

We are also grateful to City Engineer Garry Nathan who led the effort to get the \$1.1 million Columbia Street Culvert project nearly completed. This flood prevention project was an essential and monumental task. It required the cooperation of a lot of people; particularly the neighbors and businesses who were inconvenienced, yet understood that the work needed to be done.

In the year ahead we will be starting another \$7 million in water infrastructure projects – on Columbia Street, Vliet Street, and James Street. Each of these projects is also designed to deal with flooding and other equally damaging drainage and environmental issues. The good news for taxpayers is that more than 95% of the cost of these essential infrastructure projects will be paid for with external funds.

In the year ahead we also are seeking state funds to upgrade the pumps, piping and other components of our water filtration plant system. These improvements will increase water capacity, improve efficiencies, and bring our public water system into the 21st Century.

Improving sidewalks is also a priority. Our City Planner, Joe Seman-Graves, is doing an inventory of all city sidewalks, so we can make informed decisions as we set priorities. We continue to focus on completing sidewalk improvements in our business district, but have

expanded that focus to developing safer pathways to schools, and improvements to the most heavily used sidewalks along our gateways. In the coming year watch for sidewalk improvements on Columbia Street, as well as downtown.

Progress on Cleaner Greener Cohoes

Making the city more walkable is not only an important infrastructure project, it is a key component of our Cleaner Greener Cohoes initiative.

Under this initiative, we also launched a range of beautification projects throughout the city.

- We have conducted an initial needs assessment for all City parks, green spaces, and trails. This basic information is essential as we seek funding opportunities for repairs, upgrades, and programming in these neighborhood-based spaces.
- We brought back the Adopt-a-Park program, and expanded it to include our gateways. And, we launched Tidy-Up-Tuesday's. Each of these programs relies on volunteers from the community giving of their time and talents. We saw what a difference volunteers can make this past year when Ben Felthousen, manager of Felthousen's Florist and Greenhouse, cleared and cleaned up the Columbia Street gateway and added in some fall color with pumpkins and mums and hay; when Keith and Andrea Hancock of Fur Ever Friends cleaned up the area on 787 at Bridge Street; when Paul Giller took on much needed landscaping around the signs at Berkley Park; and when members of the Spindle City Vineyard Church cleaned up Lansing's Park on Tuesday's in the summer. We are grateful to all of them, and to all of the other dedicated volunteers that I don't have time to name, who are pitching in to make a difference.
- Our DPW crews, led by Deputy Commissioner Ken Radliff, worked day in and day out to mow, plant, clip, and clean the many parks and green spaces around the city. We are grateful to Ken and his team for their dedication and hard work.

We are also exploring some innovative clean energy programs. With the goal of reducing municipal energy costs, city staff are researching the economic and technical feasibility of adding a solar installation to our Reservoir. Yes, you heard that right: on the water. It is the one place we have space. This so-called "Floating Solar" project could be a model for other communities. It is just in the early stages, but we have had some promising conversations with industry, academic, and government experts, so stay tuned.

The most comprehensive Cleaner Greener Cohoes project that is ready to go, pending approvals, is our plan to convert the city's streetlights to energy efficient LED bulbs in "smart lighting" infrastructure. The reduction in energy costs and other savings to the city for switching to LED street lighting is calculated to be approximately \$9 million over 20 years.

As I said when I introduced the plan in early January: this project is a win, win, win for taxpayers and the environment. We save energy by converting to LED street lights. We generate funds to invest in additional energy savings upgrades to our historic city buildings. And, on top of all that, we also benefit from a significant annual city budget savings for decades to come.

Progress Investing to Restore Historic Cohoes

My proposal is to reinvest approximately \$3 million of the financial gains into an Historic Building Preservation Fund to finance additional energy savings upgrades to city-owned buildings, including replacing windows at City Hall, as part of our Restore Historic Cohoes plan.

Reinvesting some of this savings is the smart thing to do. We have an obligation to preserve our historic city buildings that have been neglected for far too long. For example, windows in city hall are literally falling out. During the recent blizzard, snow piled up inside on many of the windowsills. Investing some of the cost savings from the street light conversion project into our window replacement project will pay off in many ways.

This project is based on research and data. In 2020 we completed an energy audit of our municipal buildings, working to identify areas where we can save energy and save money. We also did a structural audit of our historic but long neglected City Hall building.

Guided by these studies, and with funding support from a New York State grant secured with the assistance of Assemblyman John McDonald, last year we invested \$300,000 in critically needed roof and masonry repairs to City Hall. Before doing that work, bricks were coming loose and when it rained outside, it literally rained inside in two offices. This was an important first step, but it is just the first step.

Much work remains to be done to preserve and protect City Hall and other community assets. We intend to continue and accelerate progress as part of my Restore Historic Cohoes plan that focuses on three areas:

- **Restoring our historic municipal buildings** including City Hall, the First National Bank Building that houses the Music Hall and Visitor's Center, and the former St John's Episcopal Church that houses our library.
- We also want to encourage businesses and investors **to restore our historic commercial buildings**, breathing new life into these important treasures. We saw several successful examples in the last year,
 - With Luke and Terri Gladue bringing the Kresge building back to life with those amazing micro-apartments on the second floor. They are now working on doing the same in a building just down the street.
 - Ben Williams, Pastor Dona Williams (who offered today's invocation), and members of the Good Ground Family Church have worked tirelessly to fulfill the family's dream of converting portions of the former St Agnes Church into the Cohoes Connect Center for Youth, which will provide much needed opportunities for young people in Cohoes when portions open this year.

- And Robilee McIntyre, artist and businesswoman, has purchased what had long been Uncle John's Diner. She was inspired to buy the building while visiting Cohoes on a Friday night for Eat in the Streets. She is restoring it into the soon to open Tiny Diney, keeping the nearly 100-year-tradition of that building as a local diner.

Cohoes has so many more historic commercial buildings that can be brought back to life. -Steve Napier, our tenacious Director of Community and Economic Development is working with interested investors to help do just that. At the moment, there are several real estate transactions in progress that will continue the transformation of our historic downtown, so stay tuned for those announcements later this year.

Our message is: if you are an entrepreneur who has a love of history and architecture, and an eye on the future, come talk with us about Cohoes.

- The third component of our Restore Historic Cohoes plan focuses on **restoring residential buildings and homes**. Throughout our community there are homes, large and small, with historic charm, and some with historic significance. We have been delighted to see people investing in these properties and bringing them back to life, and we are working to do what we can to encourage more of that home ownership, particularly among those who value the history of the building and its surroundings.

We are also focused on other aspects of the city's rich history. For example

- ✓ We are collaborating with those leading the project to restore the Matton Shipyard on Delaware Avenue, by integrating plans for the city's waterfront park at the 70 Delaware Avenue development project down the street. -Our goal is to create greater access to the waterfront and more understanding of its history. Eventually we hope to create linkages to the area in front of the historic Van Schaick Mansion. -Over time, we envision creating links from the waterfront to the Mohawk Hudson Bike Trail, the Cohoes Erie Canal Parkway, and more.
- ✓ We are pursuing improvements around the Cohoes Falls including repairing the crumbling wall at Manor Avenue, adding a viewing area, and adding a safety light for visitors to cross North Mohawk Street at the parking lot.
- ✓ We are also working to revitalize the Cohoes Erie Canal Parkway, which is an historic gem traversing the middle of our city. It was vital to our economic past, and will be to our future.

Progress Made Possible by Dedicated Workforce

All of these initiatives – our infrastructure projects, the Cleaner Greener Cohoes initiative, Restore Historic Cohoes, and more - are designed to help us navigate through these uncertain times, honoring our heritage, while strengthening our sense of community, and building toward what is next.

The progress we have made this year is possible because of the work of our City Employees. The necessary work performed by them day to day in ordinary times is challenging enough. I want to acknowledge their significant efforts that keep our city running during these extraordinary times: members of the Police and Fire Departments, DPW workers, Code Enforcement officers, and to all of our City Hall staff who have continuously aided the public throughout the pandemic ... Thank you all.

I think all will agree that my executive assistant Amanda Primeau and secretary Kathleen LaBombard deserve a special mention. They are the glue that has helped hold things together, particularly during this last year. They are the welcoming faces and voices of city hall, greeting people, getting people answers, finding creative ways to get things done, and treating everyone with patience and respect in the process. They are tireless workers with a deep dedication to public service, and a love for Cohoes. I greatly appreciate them both.

Their efforts, and the efforts of all of our city workforce is appreciated not only by me but by the people of Cohoes who they so proudly serve.

Shaping Our Future...Resilient and Strong

This has been a year of crisis around our country and around the globe.

We are living through unprecedented times.

Books will be written about this era - and we are all witnesses to history,

But, we are not merely witnesses. By our actions, we are helping to write that story.

It is up to all of us, working together, to shape our future.

It is my honor to be leading our beloved city at this historic juncture - and I thank the great people of Cohoes for the opportunity to serve and work alongside them as we work together to safely and soundly emerge from the COVID pandemic.

I have no doubt we will succeed because, in this historically challenging time, **the people of Cohoes have proven that the State of our City is Resilient, and yes, the State of our City is Strong.**