



**For Immediate Release**

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# **Mayor William T. Keeler State of the City Address Cohoes, NY**

**February 10, 2020**

*(prepared remarks)*

I appreciate you joining me today on this, my first State of the City address.

I am deeply honored to be mayor of my hometown of Cohoes, especially in this, our 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary as a city.

Just over 40 days ago I stood on the stage of the Cohoes Music Hall, surrounded by family, colleagues, and friends, raised my right hand, and pledged to faithfully discharge the duties of the office of the Mayor. It is a pledge I take very seriously.

At that time, and repeatedly since, I have made 3 promises:  
First, and foremost, I would work to return honor, integrity and professionalism to City Hall.

Secondly, I would work to restore a sense of community in Cohoes,

And number three, I would work to rebuild strained relationships with Federal, State, and local officials who are essential partners in moving our city forward.

In just 40 days, working together, we have made progress on all fronts:

Number one: To restore professionalism, on day two I appointed a Public Safety Commissioner, Jim Ward, to address the leadership issues in the Police Department.

Number two: We began to strengthen our sense of community that first weekend when we hosted an open house in the Cohoes Library, inviting Neighborhood Watch, Spindle City Historic Society, The Cohoes High Alumni Association, and Choose Cohoes for Arts to showcase their work. We brought attention to the wonderful array of Library programs, and along with Assemblyman John McDonald, we hosted a Census information session and job fair.

More than 200 people attended, and 22 people applied for Census jobs. It was a great day, and we have continued events like that every week since.

Number three: To repair relationships I have met with dozens of Federal, State, and local officials, and am gratified by the response. Congressman Paul Tonko has come to Cohoes three times in the first month alone, and is committed to help us on environmental, housing, and a host of other issues. Senator Neil Breslin jointly hosted a second Census Job Fair, and has pledged his continued support. Assemblyman McDonald has been tireless in his efforts to help jumpstart a range of initiatives, and we have met with several of Governor Cuomo's state agency staff as we pursue technical assistance and grant funding. I have also met with Mayors and County officials to discuss shared services and collaborative projects. And we are diligently working with area law enforcement agencies to address drugs and crime.

Clearly we have made progress in these first 40 days, and we have also learned a lot.

Unfortunately, some of what we have discovered is deeply troubling, but important for the residents of Cohoes to be aware of.

We all know Cohoes has been through a rough patch. As it turns out, it is rougher than we knew, with more to patch than we had anticipated.

We cannot ignore these challenges. I want to be clear, transparent, and honest with my fellow Cohoesiers:

\*the list of neglected infrastructure needs is long and expensive

\*there were dubious economic development deals done in the last four (4) years, that taxpayers will be burdened with for decades,

\*there are potentially costly irregularities in the Civil Service office

\*and the city has paid and will continue to pay a high price for leadership issues that allowed our police department to become politicized.

Let me talk about all four of these issues individually:

First on neglected infrastructure:

- Our Water Treatment Facility needs a \$2.5M upgrade;
- At our magnificent City Hall, the roof leaks, the windows need replacing, and the heating system is outdated.
- The roof at our beautiful library also is leaking. In both cases when it rains outside it literally rains inside. When a roof leaks, structural integrity worsens and mold follows;
- In this Senior Center they need new carpets and tile work;
- the Central Avenue Firehouse has simply outlived its useful life expectancy;
- and our roads and sidewalks are in various states of disrepair.
- And this is just the tip of the iceberg

So what do we do?

All of these things need to be done, and it's smarter and less expensive in the long run to do these things sooner rather than later.

We are taking a comprehensive look at all of the city's infrastructure needs: creating a priority list, determining the best potential sources for funding, and working to secure those dollars so that we can get the job done.

Our City Hall was built in 1895. It is historic and majestic. It must be preserved and restored. First, as any homeowner would do, we are taking the necessary steps to stop the roof leaks. However, we also are getting the required engineering studies, energy audits, and more to create a comprehensive check list of what else needs to be done. And the same is true for our library. Both are long term projects, and both are now underway.

In 2020 we are getting back to the basics. It's not flashy, but it needs to be done: paving roads, replacing defective water valves, and flushing hydrants and cleaning catch basins

We are collaborating with surrounding communities on essential sewage treatment projects, and more....

None of this can be done without people....

We recently welcomed the addition of Steve Hennessey as the new Commissioner of Public Works. My clear instruction to him is to focus on the 3 P's -- Potholes, Paving, and Plowing. By all accounts, he is off to a fantastic start.

During the first storm we had in January, I was out riding on a DPW tandem plow with Karl VanBramer. It was a valuable learning experience that reinforced my belief that DPW plays a critical role in keeping our city running.

Again, I want to thank Steve and all of the dedicated employees of the DPW for the wonderful job they do day in and day out.

Let's now move on to Economic Development

The last Administration doubled the salary of the Director of Economic Development to \$132,000 per year. My administration is more fiscally conservative. At my direction that salary was cut in half, back in line with the salary in the recent past.

In addition, a \$15,000 per year CEO position for the Cohoes Industrial Development Agency was created and held by the previous mayor. He then presided over the IDA for three years, and pushed through dubious deals that will burden Cohoes property tax payers for decades: Projects were bonded that should not have been, taxpayer dollars were doled out that should not have been.

Some may ask why I am talking about this now. They may ask why we cannot just move on. I agree it is time to move forward. However, it is essential to be transparent to the people of Cohoes. They need to know the full story.

Yes, the last four (4) years saw a lot of economic development in Cohoes. But now that we are able to examine the details, it has become very clear that too many of those deals were not done in the best interest of Cohoes taxpayers or other Cohoes businesses.

Let me share just one example:

Everyone knows that parking is an issue on Remsen Street yet the previous administration made a deal to give just one developer a sizable monopoly on prime downtown parking. He was given an option on the parking lot near Smith's restaurant, and two lots across the street, and a lot around the corner. It makes no sense to give up those parking lots, because it would be at the expense of all of the businesses and residents in the surrounding blocks.

In a separate deal, unbeknownst to the Planning Board, taxpayers would be footing the bill to construct an enclosed two-story parking garage within a block of the development. All parking spots would be for the exclusive use of the developer. There is no economically viable way to make that happen. Yet the developer has a signed contract.

We are doing everything we can to mitigate the problems caused by this and other questionable economic development deals done in the last 4 years... Some we will just have to live with.

Going forward, I will take a different, more comprehensive approach to economic development.

For me, there are three fundamental questions that guide any project:

Number one: Does it work economically, for all parties? We want to understand the full cost of the project to the community - not just the cost of the building itself, but what is the cost to the schools, to infrastructure, parking, transportation, quality of life, etc - and does the value outweigh the costs for the taxpayers and all residents of Cohoes?

Number two: Is it sustainable and does it add value to the city in the long run? I've said all along we need to be focused on projects that, 50 years from now when our city celebrates its bicentennial, our grandchildren will look back upon with pride.

Question number 3: Has there been community input and involvement in the process? I can tell you first-hand that the people of Cohoes have a lot of good ideas. They want to be involved. We need community involvement as we work to revitalize and strengthen Cohoes.

There is a lot to do, but we are well on our way.

- I have appointed Steve Napier as the Director of Community and Economic Development. Steve has been working tirelessly with me to chart a new path.
- We've been visiting existing businesses across the city,
- We've met with business owners who are now contemplating coming to Cohoes,
- And we are talking with other entrepreneurs and developers.
- We are building relationships with the entire Cohoes business community as we work to create our own Small Business Association in Cohoes.

- Tomorrow morning we are hosting a meeting of business owners, to get their input on how, together, we can best secure, strengthen, and champion Cohoes businesses.

Let me emphasize, we are engaging with businesses from across the City.

We are working to reimagine our downtown, including the site of the fire on Remsen Street where we must turn adversity into opportunity...

But Cohoes is bigger than just Remsen Street. We have two major commercial corridors through the city – Route 470 going east from the 112<sup>th</sup> Street bridge to the western edge of the city at Baker Avenue, and the Saratoga Street/787 corridor going north/south from the Waterford Bridge to Tibbitts Avenue.

Our vision of the Cohoes Business District incorporates all of these thoroughfares, and that will be reflected as we actively pursue partnerships and investments, including Governor Cuomo's \$10-million Downtown Revitalization initiative funding.

In sum, the new approach to economic development will be *citywide, comprehensive, and cost effective*.

The next issue of concern pertains to Civil Service.

When former Cohoes Common Council President Chris Briggs took over as Acting Mayor last summer, he was alerted to potentially very serious problems in the way the Cohoes Civil Service Department had been operating for the previous four (4) years.

As a result, New York State Department of Civil Service officials were asked to review Cohoes Civil Service Department records and practices. That review began last fall.

We have not yet received the findings or recommendations from the State. Once the findings are received, the results will be made public.

We will take appropriate action to address the issues and resolve the problems.

Going forward, we will take the necessary steps to ensure that the Civil Service Department is run in a professional manner.

The fourth and final issue that demands greater transparency is the stain on the reputation of our police department because it was allowed to be politicized.

Police officers generally do not enjoy the luxury of a Monday to Friday, 9 to 5 job like most folks. They work weekends and holidays; afternoon and midnight shifts. They often perform dangerous tasks in unpleasant environments.

The Cohoes Police Department does a very good job keeping the crime rate low and solving crime when it does occur. I have every confidence in the abilities of middle-management, rank and file patrolmen, and detectives. They have my respect and admiration.

But to function at its peak, a police department needs the support and trust of the people they serve. Over the past four (4) years that relationship has been under pressure.

I've heard it from the people of Cohoes. I've read it in media accounts. From the start, I have been questioned about the Police Department in general and its leadership in particular.

That's why - on my second day in office - I hired Jim Ward as Public Safety Commissioner. Jim is a highly respected 30 year veteran of the Cohoes Police Department, who retired as Assistant Chief five years ago.

I brought him in specifically because he's a leader who knows the department – and its potential.

I have tasked the Public Safety Commissioner with three important assignments:

First: Take the necessary steps to get the Police Department certified as an Accredited Law Enforcement Agency through the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services. I'm happy to report that process has begun.

Second: Rebuild relationships with federal, state and local law enforcement and partner with them whenever possible to reduce drugs and crime in Cohoes. I'm happy to report Commissioner Ward has met repeatedly with key regional law enforcement partners and the partnerships are already bearing fruit as multiagency task forces have made gun and drug-related arrests in the month of January alone. We are sending a clear message to drug dealers: We are coming for you.

Third: Develop a comprehensive plan to reduce drug activity in Cohoes that includes not just law enforcement but also focuses on prevention, intervention, and treatment by teaming up with our schools, the Housing Authority, Drug Courts, social service providers, and more. Again, I'm pleased to report we have begun conversations with these groups.

I think it is fair to say that in just 40 days, we have made a noticeable improvement in shifting the focus back to where it belongs, on the good work that our police officers and detectives do day in and day out.

Commissioner Ward and I are committed to addressing the leadership issues that allowed our police department to become politicized.

We are ushering in a new era of professionalism in the Cohoes PD.

While it is imperative that we work to mitigate problems left behind, it is equally important that we carve out a new path to a brighter future in Cohoes.

We are actively engaging with area churches, civic groups, arts and cultural organizations, and the not-for-profits that are the heart and soul of our city.

We are working to create a vibrant 21<sup>st</sup> century Cohoes Public Library that is a hub of our community.

We are exploring new and innovative opportunities to collaborate with the Cohoes City School District.

We are working with the Cohoes Housing Authority on a host of issues to improve the quality of life for all of their residents.

And we are committed to our partnership with this wonderful Senior Center.

There are three other very special projects I want to discuss with you today.

First is our “Cleaner Greener Cohoes” initiative. We are taking a comprehensive approach to creating a more environmentally sustainable city.

From buildings, to street lighting, to green spaces, to recycling, every aspect of how people live, work, and play in Cohoes will be considered as we map a cleaner greener future for our community.

We are embracing Governor Andrew Cuomo’s Climate Smart Communities program, as a framework for this effort. It is designed to expedite progress in mitigating and adapting to climate change at the local level. By participating, the City gets access to targeted grant programs, rebates for a wide variety of initiatives, along with free technical assistance, training, and planning tools.

Cohoes first got involved in the Climate Smart Communities program back in 2009 under the leadership of then-Mayor John McDonald, but the program has been dormant for a decade.

Cohoes has a lot of catching up to do, but just in our first 40 days we have laid the groundwork for progress.

We owe thanks to the Cohoes Common Council for taking the necessary action to jumpstart the program at the first Common Council meeting.

Our City Planner is creating a Cohoes Climate Smart Community Task Force to gather public input and expertise.

In conjunction with jumpstarting the Climate Smart Communities program, we also are working to accelerate progress on a “Cleaner Greener Cohoes” by:

\*Working with Congressman Paul Tonko on Federal funding opportunities and technical assistance for cities to become more environmentally sustainable.

\*By coordinating with New York State Assemblyman John McDonald to bring weatherization workshops and other energy efficiency programs to Cohoes residents.

\*By requesting that New York State Energy Research and Development Authority and the New York State Power Authority provide a comprehensive energy audit of Cohoes City Hall, the Cohoes Public Library, the Cohoes Music Hall, and other city buildings, to identify opportunities to conserve energy and reduce costs to the taxpayers.

\*By engaging with NYPA to develop a LED street lighting program for Cohoes, designed to reduce energy consumption and costs.

\*And by revitalizing the Cohoes Erie Canal Parkway and other long-neglected city parks and green spaces. The parks beautification effort will be led by newly appointed Deputy Commissioner of Public Works Ken Radliff.

Why are we doing all of this?

Because creating a ‘cleaner greener Cohoes’ is the smart thing to do economically and it is the right thing to do for the health and long-term sustainability of our community. We owe it to ourselves, our children, and our grandchildren.

The second special project of 2020 is short term and high impact. I am talking about getting a full Cohoes count for the 2020 Census. And for that, we need your help.

Not only is it the right thing to do for posterity... it is also critically important for Cohoes, to ensure that we get the education funding, the transportation funding, the infrastructure funding, the parks funding, and maximum sales tax revenue the City is entitled to.

If our count in 2020 is short, our accounts for the next decade will be short.

We have already joined with Assemblyman McDonald and Senator Breslin in hosting two Census Job Fairs and Information sessions.

Mark your calendar. The count starts on March 12<sup>th</sup>

Stay tuned, you will be hearing more from us on the Census.

Let’s work together to get it right.

Now I want to end where I started; talking about how proud I am to be your Mayor, particularly in 2020, the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the City of Cohoes.

We have a lot to celebrate, and we are going to do just that.

In December, we commissioned a logo to commemorate our city’s 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. That logo was designed by Lauren Payne, Robert Clancy, and their talented team of graphic artists at Spiral Design on Mohawk Street. The logo features an image of the sun rising over our magnificent Cohoes Falls – marking 2020 as the dawn of a new day in Cohoes. The logo also displays a bridge between the dates 1870 (the year Cohoes became a city) and 2020. That bridge represents the link between our past and our present.

With the artwork completed, Cohoes native Barbara LaMarche, whose family name adorned a Remsen Street variety store at the time of the Cohoes Centennial, crafted our 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary slogan: *Honor the Past, Explore the Present, and Inspire the Future.*

Throughout this, our 150<sup>th</sup> year as a City, we in Cohoes will do just that:

Four signature events will mark the year. And we will be collaborating with the community on a host of other celebratory activities throughout the year. There will be something for everyone.



The first signature event was the Winter Carnival at Van Schaick Island Park on February 1<sup>st</sup>. Throughout the day, hundreds of current and former Cohoesiers enjoyed horse-drawn carriage rides, trolley rides, live ice-sculpting of the Cohoes Mastodon, games, music, smores, and more. It was such a great community gathering! We owe a big “thank you” to all who made it happen.

Today I am announcing the three additional signature events. Mark your calendars.....

**May 15 to May 25 we will host the Cohoes 150 Heritage Festival-**  
preceded by Cohoes Restaurant Week.

With community input and involvement we will schedule a wide range of activities that best illustrate our rich history, and draw people into the city. Events will include the Memorial Day Parade and other traditional Memorial Day Weekend activities.

**September 12<sup>th</sup> will feature the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Parade and Cultural Celebration-**

With a parade down Columbia Street and a celebration of our cultural heritage to follow.

**November 14<sup>th</sup> will feature the Cohoes 150 Festival of Music and Arts-**

Anchored at the Cohoes Music Hall, we will feature the artists and musicians of the past, present, and future...

Fifty years after the Cohoes Centennial Celebration, some of us still have photos, memorabilia, and fond memories of those happy days. What we do now impacts the future: whether it is restoring our historic buildings, creating a cleaner greener Cohoes, or simply celebrating our 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

Together we are working to do things across the city that will still be valued 50 years from now as the city celebrates its bicentennial. Just think, some of the children who will participate in this year’s 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary events will also be present at the city’s 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Hopefully they will look back at 2020 with equally fond memories, as they still enjoy the fruits of our labor.

Today the State of our City is strong, and only getting stronger.

I thank you for bestowing on me the responsibility and the honor of leading this wonderful city we all love at this historic time.

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