

The Honorable Mayor William T . Keeler
presents the

2023 *State*
OF THE
CITY

A D D R E S S

Tuesday, January 31, 2023



Welcome fellow Cohoesiers to the 2023 State of the City address. When you elected me mayor three years ago, I promised to build partnerships with organizations outside of government, and to re-establish relationships with elected officials inside of government, at all levels. And I spent my first month in office doing exactly that: meeting with New York State Assemblyman John McDonald on day one to discuss various issues; meeting with U.S. Representative Paul Tonko at City Hall to discuss my concern for the residents of Saratoga Sites, who for decades lived in an industrial zone; and meeting with New York State Senator Neil Breslin at our public library to talk about restoring that building and my efforts to help ensure an accurate census count.

I mention these early meetings because they laid the groundwork for progress that continues to this day on some of my key initiatives, including Restore Historic Cohoes, Cleaner Greener Cohoes, street paving and replacing sidewalks. Those early relationships also led to a renewed flow of grant money into Cohoes, which has exceeded \$25 million over the past several years.

At the risk of appearing greedy, we plan to apply for \$20 million in grants for 2023.

In addition to productive bonds with elected officials, we've also built private sector relationships with a range of partners:

Representatives of The Food Bank of Northeastern New York, for example, who supported our efforts to feed our neediest residents during the height of the pandemic. Not by coincidence, that partnership later resulted in Cohoes hosting the 2022 Mac-n-Cheese Bowl that brought 4,000 folks to our downtown and is scheduled to take place again this March.

We reached out to Home Box Office and leveraged our ongoing historic preservation efforts to draw crews to Cohoes for the filming of the HBO series *The Gilded Age*. This again put Cohoes in a positive light and was a source of pride, especially for residents of the First and Second Ward neighborhoods where filming took place.

Before I continue, let me cut to the chase... The State of the City is strong. In this hour, I'll speak in greater detail about topics such as public safety, infrastructure and finances. But I can tell you right now that, no matter the topic, Cohoes is in good shape, and on a trajectory to get even better – and that's despite one recession in the rearview mirror and another predicted in the year ahead.

I'm optimistic because we are spending appropriately to ensure adequate police and fire protection while also investing wisely in our roads, city-owned buildings, safe drinking water and sanitary sewer systems – all while being fiscally responsible.

I want to begin by talking about public safety. In my opinion, the number one job of any mayor is public safety, and I assure you it is mine. As I will speak to shortly, the Department of Public Works provides critical services that enable dense populations to live together in a city. But if people don't feel safe, and they have the means, they will leave cities for the suburbs or countryside. Around the nation and across the state, the fear of rising crime is very real.

Crime in general, and violent crime in particular, has seen an uptick in many cities over the past few years. In Cohoes, the crime rate has remained flat overall and violent crime has trended down over that same period. In 2022, all but two cities in the greater Capital Region experienced murders. Cohoes was one of those two, with zero homicides. In fact, we have entered our third straight year without a murder in Cohoes.

I want to thank the Common Council for approving the 2023 budget, which again fully funds our police department. Under the leadership of Chief Todd Waldin the department continues to make significant strides. From its beginning in 1865 until last year, the Cohoes PD hired a grand total of one female patrol officer. With the recruiting done last year and this January's swearing-in of new officers, females suddenly represent 10% of the department's patrol strength. Cohoes PD also added Black and Hispanic officers to its ranks for the first-time ever last year, making today's department the most diverse in its history, better reflecting the community it so proudly serves.

Technology investments in the form of License Plate Readers and Pole Cameras, placed strategically across the city last year, have provided unblinking eyes that immediately paid dividends. Within hours after the cameras were installed, police solved a car/pedestrian hit-and-run accident. The LPRs and cameras have helped police tremendously on a wide variety of investigations, including lost children, thefts from parked vehicles, a gun threat at school, stolen vehicles and more. Cases like these were all quickly solved with the help of technology. The LPRs and cameras will undoubtedly prove beneficial

going forward, providing critical evidence to help secure more convictions. And since a small number of people commit a disproportionate amount of crime, quick arrests can often prevent future crimes. LPRs and cameras are worth their weight in gold.

As helpful as technology is, the hard work of our patrols and detectives is paramount. Proactive outreach to the community, long before incidents occur, is critical to obtaining cooperation at the time a police intervention becomes necessary. Chief Waldin has instilled the importance of good police-community relations in his department. Cohoes PD actively participates in, and even sponsors, a large number of community events throughout the year. Chief Waldin leads by example, attending Neighborhood Watch meetings, always joined by a handful of detectives and uniformed personnel.

Speaking of Neighborhood Watch, I'd like to acknowledge Tom McGrath for organizing the monthly VSI Neighborhood Watch meetings, and Carrie Briggs for spearheading the monthly Lansing Street Neighborhood Watch group, carrying on the legacy of the late Joe Primeau. On behalf of the city, thank you and all those who regularly attend the meetings for helping make Cohoes a safer place.

Another factor that helps keep crime low in Cohoes is Chief Waldin's regular outreach to external law enforcement partners. These days it's not at all unusual to find State Troopers, Sheriff's Deputies, Troy PD and other law enforcement agencies working closely with Cohoes Police to respond to residents' concerns about illegal drug activity. Any citizen complaint reported to the PD gets the attention it deserves. Drug enforcement, particularly undercover work, takes months to resolve. But it warms my heart to see residents in nearby apartments cheering law enforcement teams as they execute warrants and lead drug dealers away in handcuffs.

Assistant Chief Tim Keefe has been the point man for the PD's body-camera program, which rolled out for the first time last week. I want to thank local developers Ken Raymond and Todd Curley of Prime Companies for their generous donation that facilitated the purchase of the department's body cameras. I'd also like to thank Albany County Sheriff Craig Apple and his staff for their partnership in establishing and maintaining our body-cam program.

Progress continues toward CPD becoming a New York State Accredited Law Enforcement Agency. I'm grateful

for the efforts of the police chiefs and appreciate the men and women of our police department for everything they do on a daily basis to keep the people of Cohoes safe.

While I applaud the progress of Cohoes' Finest, I also appreciate the crucial efforts of Cohoes' Bravest. The Cohoes Fire Department has been led for the past 20 years by Chief Joe Fahd. Chief Fahd is a 55-year veteran of the fire service and a past president of the state Association of Fire Chiefs. He is currently the 2nd Vice-President of the Eastern Division of the International Association of Fire Chiefs.

I again want to take this opportunity to thank the members of the Common Council for approving a 2023 budget that fully staffs our fire department. I also thank them for passing a separate measure that allowed me to order a new \$500,000 pumper truck for the department. The 2024 model will replace a 20-year-old truck as we continue to upgrade the fleet after adding new SUVs in each of the past two years.

While fortunate that we can count on one hand the number of serious structure fires here in the past few years, our firefighters have responded to thousands of

911 calls over that same period, often assisting ambulance personnel with medical emergencies. When we do have a major fire, we can count on all the members being recalled, as well as mutual aid from departments in Watervliet, Green Island and the Watervliet Arsenal. Our firefighters do important work, and they do it well, including innumerable NARCAN-saves and helping to deliver a healthy baby girl just in time for Christmas.

Our Civil Service office will hold an entrance examination in mid-February and we anticipate a good turnout. Being a firefighter is a great way to support one's community. My hat is off to my friends and the thousands of others who volunteer in towns across the state. But joining the ranks of a paid, professional department like CFD is an exciting and rewarding career choice. It also offers wonderful opportunities to advance through the ranks. We anticipate hiring several new firefighters this year. We'll also be promoting two new captains and two new lieutenants in the very near future.

In a related matter, the city is currently attempting to negotiate a contract with a private ambulance company in an effort to improve service to our residents.

Nationwide, ambulance response times have grown

longer in the post-COVID era for many reasons, though rarely the fault of the ambulance company. The Capital Region – including Cohoes – is no exception.

The problem is not a lack of ambulances per se, but rather the long delays patients face in the admissions process. Ambulances often wait in an emergency room queue for hours, taking them out of service and resulting in delayed response times as calls back up. Elected and appointed officials at the state level are working with healthcare professionals on legislation supporting telemedicine as a means of reducing the burden on hospitals. In the meantime, area municipalities are working together to support the private ambulance companies. I'm particularly grateful to Town Supervisors Peter Crummey in Colonie and Peter Barber in Guilderland for allowing their respective ambulance squads to serve the residents of Cohoes.

Let's move on now from public safety to infrastructure:

The infrastructure needs of our 150-plus-year-old city remain great, though we are making significant progress. Let me touch on some of the public works projects that are either underway, recently completed or nearly complete.

- On Columbia Street, our Sewer Separation Project began in April and is 85% complete. It will include new sidewalks and street paving between Broadway and Trull Street, and should be wrapped up this spring.
- On nearby James Street, our culvert replacement project is 80% complete. Both pipe barrels are operational, and completion is also expected this spring.
- The Mohawk Hudson Bike Path Project is under construction and about 10% complete. The bike path is being resurfaced accompanied by drainage and green space improvements. That will be completed this summer.
- Our Sewer Separation Project on Central Avenue is 95% complete.
- Our Sewer Separation Project on Saratoga Street was recently completed.

- Our circa 1911 Water Filtration Plant received a \$2.5 million federal grant last year, courtesy of U.S. Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, that will go toward an estimated \$18 million in needed upgrades.

The aforementioned projects alone constitute over \$10 million in infrastructure improvements, with Cohoes taxpayers picking up a mere \$300,000 tab – less than 4% of the combined costs.

As we complete these and other upcoming sewer separation projects, we are removing storm water from our sanitary sewer lines. That means we will no longer be sending already-clean rainwater to the sewage treatment facility, where it was needlessly being chemically treated at taxpayers' expense. It also prevents stormwater and sewage from backing up into homes during major storms. We will save thousands of dollars annually as a result of these projects.

Another sewer separation project is currently planned for Manor Avenue and will begin later this year.

But it's not just the centuries-old infrastructure that needs attention. Even the four-year-old High-Water Tank was found to have rust damage during last year's inspection. There are a lot of moving parts when it comes

to managing a city, and I am fortunate to be surrounded with some outstanding professionals.

Let me take this opportunity to thank our longtime City Engineer Garry Nathan for his yeoman's efforts in seeing these projects to fruition. Garry, for those of you who don't know him, was first hired by Mayor McDonald (Virginia, not John).

I'd also like to formally introduce our much-less-tenured Assistant City Engineer Shane Lewis, who we hired just last August. We hope he'll stick around for a few decades as well!

Our engineers are currently mapping all storm-sewer outlets, as well as catch basins and manholes.

On a related note, the Department of Public Works continues to do an excellent job of keeping our city running. Under the leadership of Commissioner Steve Hennessey and Deputy Commissioner Ken Radliff, our hard-working DPW crews provide essential services that we all-too-often take for granted: picking up household trash, ensuring our water is potable, and our streets passable. They do these things and much, much more, regardless of the weather and almost always without complaint. I greatly appreciate the job they do!

We've made a concerted effort over the past two years to reduce litter on the streets by deploying new, larger recycling carts that have lids to contain the materials. All too often, recyclables in the old bins would blow away. Also, we now assign two DPW employees to pick up litter all over the city five days a week. I've noticed the difference and I'm pleasantly surprised to hear how many compliments those guys receive.

Commissioner Hennessey is continually upgrading our fleet of DPW vehicles and equipment, recently adding a backhoe, pickup trucks, a wood-chipper, and a soon-to-arrive garbage truck that was partially grant-funded.

Last year, he oversaw DPW crews as they repaired catch basins, valve covers and made all the other repairs needed to prepare for street paving. Under Commissioner Hennessey's leadership, we were able to pave more streets in a single season than during any other in memory – 35 in all. If you live on those streets...great! If not, we still have a long to-do list and there's a good chance we'll get to yours this summer. That's because, for the second year in a row, Cohoes received an extra \$1.1 million in State Touring Routes funding. I thank Assemblyman McDonald for recognizing our city's needs and for enthusiastically supporting the

awarding of this aid to Cohoes, which helped make much of the paving possible.

Like DPW, our Building Department has been quite busy. Developers large and small continue to invest in Cohoes, and this year we will see even more development.

Much of the new construction around the city is geared toward providing better housing opportunities for existing and incoming residents.

Lexington Hills Phase Two is currently underway. By year-end it will house 120 luxury apartments in 10 new buildings – representing a more than \$17 million investment in Cohoes that will generate \$250,000 in immediate fees and more annually in property taxes. I'm told there is already a waiting list to lease the new units!

Hoffman's Car Wash will open its new, \$3 million facility this spring in Cohoes on the site of the long-vacant Juncta lot. Due to its proximity to 787 and SR-32, I have no doubt the company will profit from its venture. We believe many of our residents will take advantage of the newfound convenience, which will include free vacuum service.

While the new construction is welcome, Cohoes is also home to some of the region's most iconic buildings, including City Hall, our Public Library and Cohoes Music Hall. It's no secret that my administration has prioritized the preservation and restoration of these three city-owned buildings. In fact, it's part of our Restore Historic Cohoes initiative. For our efforts, Cohoes received the 2022 Excellence in Historic Preservation Award from the General Peter Ganesvoort Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution. I credit our awesome team of grant writers who have been incredibly effective at securing outside funding.

Specifically, I want to recognize our Director of Operations Theresa Bourgeois, our City Planner Joe Seman-Graves, and his staff of grant writers including Sharon Butler and Josh Giller. Their considerable efforts have produced outstanding results. In the last month alone, our Music Hall received grants of \$500,000 from the state Department of Parks & Historic Preservation, \$500,000 through a New York State and Municipal Facilities Grant, also known as a SAM grant, and \$1.4 million from the New York State Energy Research and Development Agency, or NYSERDA for short. That's \$2.4 million in grant funding for one building in one month.

The money will pay for necessary roof and window restorations as well as replacement of the Music Hall's HVAC system.

The city recently won three other New York State grants totaling \$1.3 million and a \$1.1 million grant from NYSERDA that will all go toward a new roof and HVAC system for City Hall. That's another \$2.4 million in grant funding!

We've also secured five grants totaling \$1.1 million for similar exterior and interior restorations at our Public Library.

In all, that's nearly \$6 million in outside aid coming into the city thanks to the determined efforts of our grant-writing team. We are deeply grateful to Governor Kathy Hochul and NYSERDA President Doreen Harris for their shared vision and generous support of our initiatives. I also appreciate the efforts of Assemblyman McDonald and Senator Breslin on the city's behalf.

Now, I'd like to shift to finances:

Fiscally, our city remains in the black. For the third straight year, there will be no property tax increase. In

fact, property taxes were reduced in 2023 for the first time in memory – and we’d like to reduce them again in 2024. Water and sewer fees have been steady for the same period, and I see no need to raise them moving forward; both have appropriately been self-funding.

I confer with City Comptroller Mike Durocher daily. Together, we manage a prudent strategy designed to keep the city’s finances on plan. First, we are holding the line on spending. Second, we are continually creating efficiencies. And third, we aggressively seek outside funding. Rest assured that we will continue to deliver excellent services while keeping taxes low.

The planned Floating Solar Project, which I’ve discussed on previous occasions, is our next big cost-saving endeavor. I anticipate that it will happen in 2024. Once fully operational, we estimate it will save city taxpayers \$500,000 a year.

While our annual audit results won’t be available until the end of the first quarter, we have a good sense that our unreserved “rainy day” fund will once again come in around last year’s high level.

Before closing, I'd like to provide quick updates on some projects around the city:

- the conversion of our 1,600 streetlights to LED lamps is 98% finished, with significant energy and cost savings underway.
- In November, a \$625,000 parks-upgrade program was completed. Courts at Sunset and Greenbriar parks were resurfaced and now include Pickleball courts. New fencing was installed at both parks and, for the first time, Greenbriar now has a \$240,000 play set. I'm sure that will be a big hit with kids and their parents!
- You may recall that Cohoes received \$1.7 million from the American Rescue Plan of 2021. We are required to spend the money by 2026, but have been taking our time. To date, we've spent or pledged \$280,000 for items such as a new phone system at City Hall, new gas pumps and exterior lighting at the DPW garage, and a subsidy to help pay for the James Street culvert replacement project. Accordingly, we have about \$1.4 million remaining.
- We have made progress in the plight of Saratoga Sites residents and the problems with Norlite. My effort to relocate these residents from this Industrial Zone began

in January 2020, in a conversation with Congressman Tonko. Subsequent discussions with Cohoes Housing Authority Board President Mark Pascale led to him selling the relocation plan to the entire CHA Board, the body that effectively owns the federal housing project. Three years later, two-thirds of the families have been moved to better, safer apartments, mostly in Cohoes. The remaining residents will almost certainly be moved out in the months ahead. Once all of the residents are relocated, the city has agreed to purchase the property, raze the buildings and prepare the site for future industrial use.

I would understand if any nearby homeowners desire similar assistance. I've also heard the calls of interest groups that want Norlite shuttered. But politics is the art of the possible, and perfect is the enemy of good. For anyone who's paid attention to this issue for the past seven decades, the relocation of these low-income families from the shadows of Norlite is very good news, and a very positive step.

- On a related note, Norlite recently added wind screens and air monitors to limit and measure fugitive dust escaping from its campus. The state Department of Environmental Conservation has closely scrutinized the

company's operation in the past three years, resulting in a Notice of Violation regarding the dust. And last year the state Attorney General's Office filed a lawsuit against the company over the issue. The matter is still pending.

- I'm pleased to report that the restoration of the main Public Library building, which has been closed for over a year, will begin in earnest this spring. In the meantime, our satellite library will continue to provide services here in the Senior Center until the main facility reopens. In fact, I'd like to keep the satellite library open permanently.

- We anticipate restoration of City Hall and the Music Hall will begin this summer.

- Two projects on Van Schaick Island are in the works. Both will provide public access to the Hudson River waterfront for the first time in memory. A city park along the river south of the 112th Street Bridge will include a picnic area and kayak launch. I believe this park can be opened by 2024. In addition to this project, we are supporting the state Parks Department in its restoration of the Matton Shipyard property north of the bridge. Window and siding work has been underway since

summer. Some grounds work is also planned that will allow public access to the river, including a kayak launch.

- In late summer 2023 or the spring of '24, we will replace water and sewer lines along the length of Columbia Street, repave the street in its entirety, install three linear miles of new sidewalks covering both sides of the thoroughfare, and plant ornamental trees. The \$6 million project will be completely paid for with federal and state funds, part of our Safe Pathways to School Initiative.
- Our \$6 million Floating Solar project has entered the design phase and, if all goes according to plan, should be operational by 2024, with very significant energy and cost savings to follow.

CLOSING

I began this address talking about building relationships with elected officials. So, it's only fitting that I wind down by mentioning one particular official I'll miss collaborating with: New York State Senator Neil Breslin, whose legislative district was redrawn for 2023 and no longer includes Cohoes. Senator Breslin was a champion of our library and is a true gentleman. That said, I've had

a couple of occasions to meet with our new State Senator, Jake Ashby, a combat veteran who served our country in Iraq and Afghanistan. I look forward to working with him on matters of mutual concern in the months ahead.

I think this is also an appropriate time to thank Assemblyman McDonald for his truly tireless efforts on behalf of the people of Cohoes. I speak with John often and, when I call him to discuss an issue, the conversation goes like this: “John, this is what’s going on and this is what I need...” And on the other end of the phone, he says: “Yep, I know exactly what you’re talking about...” And I know he does because, as a former three-term mayor of Cohoes, he’s dealt with a lot of the same issues.

My administration has a slogan that we work toward daily: Honor the Past, Explore the Present, and Inspire the Future. Our focus on restoring the beautiful 19th century architecture seen in our Library, Music Hall and City Hall reflects our commitment to the past and the efforts of those who came before us. Our dedication to bringing the community together is evident in the many local events that we’ve either created or enthusiastically continued – Eat in the Street, the Soup Stroll, Small Business Saturday, the VSI Winter Carnival, the Mac-n-

Cheese Bowl, the Holiday Market, Rock the Block, and the Turkey Trot. Bringing residents together to enjoy themselves and make memories helps us all explore the present. Lastly, we aim to inspire future generations with the likes of our Floating Solar array and other green energy projects.

Cohoes has been ascendant for decades – thanks in part to the efforts of mayors past and their respective administrations. Today, we continue to rise. For the past three years, we have vigorously pursued a wide range of grants. As a result, Cohoes has been awarded \$25 million in outside funding – an amount not seen since the Model Cities Era, as our community prepared to celebrate its centennial at the height of President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society.

Millions of dollars in state and private funding will go a long way toward our goals of restoring City Hall, Cohoes Music Hall, and the Public Library building. Millions more in federal aid will help upgrade our 112-year-old Water Filtration Plant, and make our 21st Century Floating Solar project a reality.

So I will say it again: The state of our city is strong, and getting stronger. Cohoes is a city rich in history. It is

home to the primeval and majestic Cohoes Falls. It's where the Mastodons roamed 10,000 years ago. Plans that led to the turning point of the American Revolution were developed at my favorite house in Cohoes, the Van Schaick Mansion. Two centuries ago, businessmen in Cohoes harnessed hydropower and built factories housing textile mills. Those historic buildings still stand today, reimagined and repurposed by contemporary investors with the enthusiastic cooperation of previous city administrations.

My family has resided here since before the American Revolution. My children and grandchildren are 9th and 10th generation Cohoesiers. I want them, and future generations, to behold our historic 18th and 19th century buildings not as ruins, but as vibrant community centers.

Cohoesiers are rightly proud of their history. Let's also prove ourselves worthy of our ancestors.

Serving as mayor of our beloved city is one of the greatest honors of my life. I thank the citizens of my hometown for bestowing this privilege upon me, and for their continued support.

I thank you all for joining me here today, and I thank the taxpayers who make everything we do possible. May God continue to bless us and our beloved City of Cohoes.

