

# TOWN OF BETHLEHEM

Albany County - New York

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Town Supervisor

## State of the Town Address

February 1, 2021

### WELCOME

Good evening and thank you for joining this online State of the Town address. On a normal year, we would be gathered in Town Hall, but 2020 and 2021 are anything but normal years.

Before I talk about the resiliency of our community and the important services our Town government has continued to provide through this crisis, I want to take a moment to thank the elected officials who have been serving our community locally, at the state level, and in Washington. So please join me in thanking:

- Congressman Paul Tonko, who is working hard to bring federal COVID relief funds to us;
- Senator Neil Breslin and Assembly member Pat Fahy, who have fought valiantly for our interests in the state legislature;
- County Executive Dan McCoy and County Legislators Frank Comisso, Joanne Cunningham, Andrew Joyce, Jeff Kuhn, Matt Miller, Vicky Plotsky, and Bill Reinhardt who are working so hard for us at the County level, and have shown outstanding leadership during the pandemic;
- And Town Board members Joyce Becker, Maureen Cunningham, Dan Coffey, and Jim Foster; Highway Superintendent Marc Dorsey; Town Justices Ryan Donovan and Andy Kirby; Town Clerk Nanci Moquin; and Receiver of Taxes Alicia Roney, who have worked for us on so many fronts over the year.



### BLACK HISTORY MONTH

Tonight, I'm going to focus on three core themes: resiliency, people, and services.

But before I do, I first want to take a moment to recognize that today is the first day of Black History Month. In 2020, we saw a nationwide awakening and rising up against oppression, mistreatment, and inequality. This is an important moment, for Bethlehem and our country, and we have a responsibility to recognize the vital role that people of color have in our Town and ensure that everyone feels welcomed in our community.

In celebration of this month, our Parks & Recreation Dept has prepared a story walk along which residents can learn more about the important roles that Black Americans have played in the development and success of our nation. But we really haven't explored the history of people of color here in Bethlehem, whether the lives of enslaved people who were forced to live here or the perniciousness of redlining that kept people of color out.

**Black lives matter in Bethlehem** – in our neighborhoods, in our schools, and in our Town government – and I hope that residents will come forward to research our past so we can better understand who we are today and what we want to be in the future.

## RESILIENCY

One can get a measure of a person, and of a community, when we see them in periods of crisis. With the deadliest pandemic since World War I, the worst economic collapse in generations, and the most significant social uprisings since the 1960s, history will surely highlight 2020 as one Bethlehem's greatest times of crisis.

Yet when I look back on 2020, the theme that resonates most with me is not the hardship or the challenges we endured, it is the resiliency of our community. Our business owners have fought hard to keep their shops and restaurants open despite fewer customers. Our residents have remained connected despite social distancing and rarely seeing in-person smiles from friends. And our Town government has continued to deliver the critical services we rely on every day.

I know that these resilient trends will continue through 2021 and beyond, because despite the challenges and hardships we are all experiencing, Bethlehem is a wonderful place to live and do business, a place with great neighbors, great schools, and great services. We have each had many things to worry about during the year, but getting vital town services has been one constant that we haven't had to worry about.

## STAFF

Over the last 3 years, I have steadily emphasized that the Town doesn't deliver services, people do. People plow our roads. People patrol our neighborhoods. People maintain our water lines and run the plants that clean our sewage. People mow our parks, paint our fire hydrants, help businesses grow, support our older residents, guide development, and so much more.

As our town has grown, the number of town staff to support us has shrunk. Over the last decade, our town workforce has dropped from 241 to 220 in 2019, to 204 last year. That's 37 fewer people getting work done in a Town with more physical infrastructure than ever and ever growing expectations for the types of services our Town government should be delivering or is mandated to deliver—regardless of COVID-19 and the economic collapse.

Fortunately, Bethlehem has incredible town employees who have adapted their work and shown great resiliency as they have continued to deliver services that are essential to our quality of life.

## PROPERTY TAXES

Before I dig into the work of our great Town employees, I want to take a moment to talk about property taxes and how little you pay for the great services you receive from the Town.



As you know, we pay our property taxes in two installments: one bill in January, the second in September. These payments are collectively what I hear people referring to when they say “I pay high taxes.”

When I hear “I pay high taxes,” it almost always means “I pay high taxes and I’m not getting value for my dollar.” I want to take a moment to correct this misperception about value, because most of your property tax dollars never come to the Town. Instead, our property taxes are distributed between 5 completely independent taxation districts. In 2021,

- 68% will go to your school district
- 4% will go to your fire department
- 4% will go to your library
- 13% will go to Albany County, leaving just
- 11% for the Town of Bethlehem.

**So for every property tax dollar you pay in 2021, the Town of Bethlehem will only see 11 cents.** The remaining 89 cents go elsewhere.

### **SALES TAX**

There’s a second critical revenue source that enables your Town government to function, and that’s sales tax. The Town of Bethlehem gets a tiny amount – a bit less than 2 tenths of a penny – of each sales tax dollar paid in Albany County, but these add up to total almost as much as revenues from property taxes.

Unfortunately, the economic collapse caused our sales tax revenues to contract, leaving us at the end of 2020 almost \$1 million short of what we received in 2019. This was a devastating hit, but through careful planning, strategic spending, delayed rehiring of vacant positions, and years of outstanding fiscal management, we were able to finish 2020 without laying off or furloughing any staff. This was a great accomplishment, but our current staff levels are not sustainable and we will need to refill vacant positions in order to continue providing Bethlehem’s excellent and extensive Town services.

### **2020 IN REVIEW**

Now I want to focus on all of the things our Town workers did in 2020 to continue delivering vital services in the face of the year’s many challenges. While Town buildings have been closed due to health concerns, the Town workforce has been able to work remotely, with shifted schedules, and with stringent workplace safety standards in order to continue providing all essential services.

Doing this required innovative new approaches. Our Town Clerk, for example, issued more than 100 marriage licenses in the Town Hall parking lot. Our Building Division shifted to conducting some inspections over Facetime. And our Parks & Rec Dept changed up summer camps so they were fun for all despite masks and social distancing.



## NATURAL DISASTERS

In addition to the pandemic, economic collapse, and social unrest, 2020 brought two natural disasters that severely tested us.

- In late July, Tropical Storm Isaias poured through New York, dropping massive amounts of rain. Our sewer and stormwater systems are separate, but when heavy rains fall, the water pressure in the saturated ground is so great that stormwater is forced into the sewer system through gaps in old pipes (such as the 80-year old clay pipe running from my house to the sewer main).

During the Tropical Storm, the flow rate into our sewage treatment plant surged to almost 5 times its normal flow. A gallon of water is about the size of a basketball, so this peak flow was the equivalent of 14,000 basketballs flowing into the plant every minute.

Despite the massive volume, our Public Works crew worked tirelessly through the night to ensure that no raw sewage ran into the Hudson River. This was a monumental accomplishment, and a testament to the dedication and hard work of our wastewater management team.



- In early October, a freak storm swept through Town. The storm lasted somewhere between 10 and 15 minutes, but in that time it left more than 14,000 Bethlehem residences in the dark, blocked roads, and damaged homes. Our Building Division was out late in the night helping homeowners identify actions they needed to take to get their homes repaired quickly. Our Highway crews worked incredibly hard too: in just two weeks, they cleared the equivalent of 90,000 lawn bags from our yards and streets. This is an overwhelming number, so I'm going to say it again to drive it home. In just two weeks, our Highway crews cleared the equivalent of 90,000 lawn bags from our yards and streets. That's 20% of an entire year's worth of brush collection in 14 days.



## POLICE REFORM & ANTI-RACISM

On June 8, 2020, more than 1,500 Bethlehem community members demonstrated against racism and police brutality. The vigil began with 8 minutes 46 seconds of silence – the length of time a Minneapolis police officer knelt on the neck of George Floyd, killing him – and continued with a spontaneous march through the streets of Delmar. This was the largest demonstration in Bethlehem's history.

Four days later, Governor Andrew Cuomo issued an Executive Order that all municipalities with police departments undertake comprehensive Police Reform & Reinvention Collaborative processes. The purpose of each Collaborative was to foster trust, fairness, and legitimacy between police departments and the communities they serve, and to address any racial bias and disproportionate policing of communities of color. The Executive Order set a deadline of April 1, 2021 for local adoption of police reform plans.

The process for creating this plan has been rigorous. It began with the promotion of Gina Cocchiara to Chief of Police. Chief Cocchiara brings decades of law enforcement expertise and an ambitious vision for modernizing the Police Dept's culture. Historically, she is just the 8<sup>th</sup> female Police Chief ever hired in the State of NY.

The Police Reform & Reinvention Collaborative continued with the appointment of an Advisory Committee and regular community meetings that began in October and will continue through February. We are fortunate to be undertaking this effort with

- strong support from our Town's elected officials,
- enthusiastic engagement by our Police Dept,
- and excellent guidance from our 19-member Advisory Committee.



I am so grateful to the many community members who have participated in this process over the months. All of the committee meetings and community forums have all been broadcast live and their recordings are available on the Town website for everyone to watch.

### **COMP PLAN UPDATE**

And continuing the theme of planning, we are moving forward with the Comprehensive Plan Update. With the theme “Bethlehem Forward,” the update process will help us shape our collective vision of Bethlehem for the next 10-15 years, and determine what we need to do to achieve it. This is a critical effort, because Bethlehem is a desirable place to live and work, so we are growing and will continue to grow. I hope everyone listening will actively participate in this effort, because we need to hear from everyone.

### **GREEN SPACE & FARM PROTECTION**

Staying with the theme of defining what Bethlehem will be in the future, we had two huge successes for protecting green spaces and farms in 2020.

- After 2 years of steady work, Henry Hudson Park is now 21 acres larger, and 3,000 feet of Vroman Kill riverbank is protected forever, thanks to the purchase of 2 properties by the Town in partnership with Scenic Hudson. We're planning on a ribbon cutting this spring and will work to open a path so the public can enjoy a wonderful view of the Vroman Kill Falls.
- In December, the town finalized protection of a 41-acre property that is one of the last large, undeveloped parcels in North Bethlehem. For more than 35 years, the land supported the Amsler Family Market's vegetable and pumpkin stand. Today, it's a beautiful mix of meadows and forest right beside busy Blessing Road. The property is still privately owned (and not open to the public), but is now protected with a permanent conservation/agricultural easement.



## SUSTAINABILITY

We also advanced several efforts to make our Town more sustainable and to take real action to address climate change.

- Over the summer, the Town purchased its first electric vehicle and installed a fleet charging station at Town Hall. We also added 2 public electric vehicle charging ports at Town Hall and 4 at Elm Ave Park, with 4 more ports ready for installation at the Town parking lot by the rail trail in Delmar this year. These advances were paid entirely by grants from the State and a National Grid incentive program.
- We also partnered with the Towns of New Scotland and Guilderland to launch a Community Choice Aggregation effort for the Capital Region. Ten other municipalities joined in with the common goal of shifting all of our residences and small businesses – about 90,000 customers – to cleaner energy. The initiative is on pause until the energy market stabilizes, but we're hopeful to get it underway in 2021.



## PUBLIC HEALTH & SERVICES

The Town Senior Services Dept worked closely with the Town's Emergency Management Office to ensure that our most vulnerable older residents were safe during summer heat waves and winter storms, and to help them stay connected during the terrible isolation of the pandemic. While they had to scale back the transportation services on which so many of our older residents rely, they have consistently been there to help them find alternatives, in some cases even personally driving residents to critical medical appointments.

The work of our Senior Services Dept goes further to ensuring that hungry families have access to food through the Town Food Pantry. Thanks to generous donations from residents at the Delmar Marketplace drop off, our Food Pantry is well stocked. Curiously, we did not see a jump in demand during the economic collapse like we did during the Great Recession. Yet local demand remains steady, and any surpluses we have are transported to food pantries that support our rural and urban neighbors.



Finally, in 2020 the Town Board passed a new Tobacco License Program to protect children from tobacco advertising.

## NAVIGATING A HISTORIC ECONOMIC COLLAPSE

We did all this work, and accomplished all of these important initiatives, despite a \$1 million revenue shortfall in 2020. To avoid furloughs and layoffs, we implemented strategic spending cuts, delayed refilling vacant positions, and tapped some of our reserve funds. We also passed a balanced budget for 2021 that stays below the Property Tax Cap despite anticipating revenues again being a million dollars less than in 2019.

COVID-19 may have hit our community hard, but it didn't keep your Town government from working.

### LOOKING FORWARD TO 2021

Looking forward into 2021, we again face many of the challenges we navigated in 2020. But as in 2020, I believe our community's strength and resilience will carry us through.

### Vaccinations

The Town of Bethlehem stands ready to open a vaccination center in partnership with Albany County should the State direct us to do so. Our Town Emergency Management Office partnered with Albany County to prepare a mass vaccination plan in the wake of the H1N1 epidemic, and has been coordinating with emergency medical services, fire fighters, and others to lay the groundwork for mass vaccinations – if the State chooses to partner with us on the effort.

Regardless, with vaccinations beginning, I am optimistic that life will gradually return to normal over the course of the year. In the meantime, however, it is vital that we all continue to wear our masks and social distance responsibly!

### Economic Development

Economic development will remain a priority for us. According to the Bethlehem Chamber of Commerce, 8 local businesses closed in 2020 due to the effects of COVID-19 and the economic collapse. Many, many more businesses are on the ropes, and COVID-19 is making the traditionally slow winter season even worse for our beloved restaurants and businesses. This Is Really Serious. Grants and government bailouts will not save our local businesses. Only we will. If you can, order takeout and shop locally to help our businesses through these hard times so they'll still be here to support us when the pandemic is over.



At the same time, we are actively supporting new businesses coming to Bethlehem. In January, I was pleased to participate in the announcement that the Port of Albany expansion into Bethlehem would become the nation's first Offshore Wind Tower Manufacturing Facility. The project will transform the 80-acre site into a world class manufacturing facility and maritime operation.

The project will include a new state-of-the-art wharf and more than 600,000 ft2 of manufacturing space in 4 buildings. A joint venture will fabricate offshore wind towers on the site. Projections are that the project will create 500 construction jobs and 300-350 manufacturing jobs.

Bethlehem fought hard for this green economy investment because it advances our goals for economic development, job creation, renewable energy, and real action on climate change.



## **New Park**

I was also pleased to announce last month that the Town had closed on the purchase of 69 acres from the Normanside Country Club with invaluable guidance from the wonderful Mohawk Hudson Land Conservancy. This land will be combined with an existing Town property to create the Normans Kill Ravines nature park. At 147 acres, the park is only slightly smaller than Elm Ave Park.

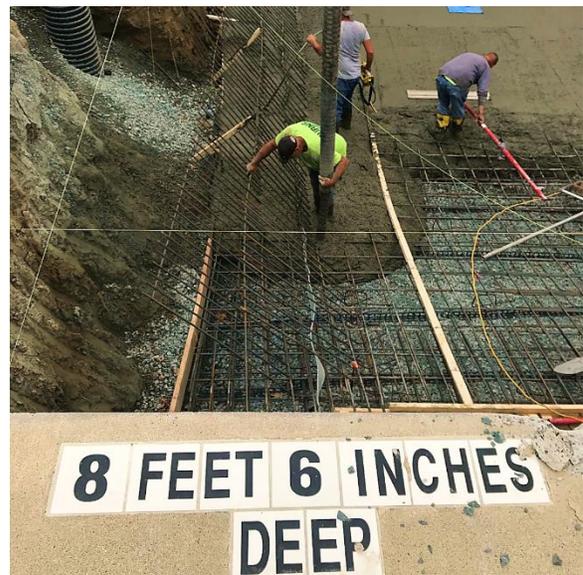
We are currently working with professionals to design a trail network that will open this gorgeous landscape of forests, ravines, wetlands, and riverside to walkers and bikers alike. I started working on the creation of this new park three years ago, and I'm so proud that our community has a wonderful new park that will serve us for generations.



## **Infrastructure Construction**

We have also been investing steadily over the years on improvements to our Town's drinking water infrastructure, and we're seeing the results today. For more than a year, our drinking water has met rigorous state and federal standards for 90 contaminants. Part of the reason for this is an \$18 million upgrade to our Clapper Road Water Treatment Plant. This project has been underway for a few years now, but we're looking forward to completion and a ribbon cutting this year.

And speaking of building, we began construction on the new Dive Pool at Elm Ave Park last year, and are on schedule to have it done in time to open this summer. We don't know exactly what opening will look like at the Pool Complex this year, but we can't wait to have the facility open again for everyone to enjoy.



## **Police Reform**

Following many community discussions about different aspects of policing in Bethlehem, the first draft of our Police Reform & Reinvention Collaborative Plan is available online. We will be accepting comments on this and the next draft through February 26, and we are on track to

complete the plan by the Governor's April 1 deadline. More importantly, our Police Dept and town leadership are committed to continue the reform effort well after that by strategically implementing the plan's recommendations.

### Core Services

In addition to the exciting highlights I just summarized, your Town government will continue to deliver the many services that contribute to our high quality of life, often without us realizing they're happening.

- Our Public Works Dept will continue to deliver more than 1.5 billion gallons of safe drinking water to more than 11,000 households, and take away and clean our sewage so the effluent from our treatment plant is cleaner than the river it's flowing into.
- Our Highway Dept will continue to pave our roads, maintain our sidewalks, plow snow, remove leaves and yard debris, and more.
- Our Police Dept will continue to serve our community, keeping our streets safe and responding to calls for help.
- Our Planning Dept will continue to carefully guide development and help us envision our future. And
- Our Senior Services Dept will help residents live in their homes longer.



We'll do all of this and more despite a second year in which we project a one million dollar reduction in sales tax revenues. Like our residents, your Town government is resilient and innovative, and with all the challenges we have to worry about, we're making sure that Town services don't need to be among your concerns.

### WHAT YOU CAN DO

But we cannot relax and return to life as usual yet, because the pandemic and economic collapse are probably the worst crises many of us will see in our lifetimes. A vaccine is on the horizon, but as a community we need to stay together to not only ensure that our families make it through, but that our neighbors and local businesses do too. I'm therefore calling on everyone to act.

- While the pandemic rages, keep your masks on and keep social distancing responsibly.
- Support our local businesses as much as your budgets will allow. The winter is usually a hard time for businesses, but unless we shop and order from them, many will not survive to the spring. **This is serious.** Our dollars will carry our businesses through, and if we don't and they close, we'll only have ourselves to blame.
- If you can, buy a little extra at the grocery store and donate to the Food Pantry at the Delmar Marketplace drop off or at one of the many Food Pantries in the Capital Region. Let's do our best to keep everyone fed.
- And check on your neighbors, especially if they are older and alone. Social isolation is terrible, and a friendly hello from the doorstep can help everyone through these cold gray days.

Bethlehem is a strong, resilient community. We have weathered these crises well, and an end is in sight. The hardworking men and women who provide the services, leadership, and support that our Bethlehem residents rely on have stepped up so, so well, and I am grateful to them.

And working together, helping each other, and investing in our community whenever possible, we will recover and be a stronger, more united, more equal, and more prosperous Bethlehem going forward.

Thank you, everyone. Be kind, be well, and be safe. Good night!



David VanLuven  
Town Supervisor

You can watch the 2021 State of the Town address  
and other addresses back to 2012  
on the Town of Bethlehem website:

<http://bethlehemtownny.iqm2.com/Citizens/VideoScreen.aspx?MediaID=1929&Frame=None>

You can find photos and information  
celebrating Bethlehem's town workers, residents,  
and businesses on Facebook:

[www.facebook.com/BethlehemSupervisor](http://www.facebook.com/BethlehemSupervisor)

#ThisIsBethlehemNY

**Together,  
we are one  
Bethlehem.**

