

State of the Town Address for Bethlehem, NY
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WELCOME

Good evening and thank you for joining this State of the Town address. Even in masks, it's so nice to be back in Town Hall!

This is my fifth State of the Town address, and it's striking to look back and see what we have accomplished as a community, and what we have overcome together. It's also inspiring to me because preparing this address gives me a chance to appreciate the great work of the people who work for this town: their creativity, sometimes their patience, and always their dedication to supporting our residents and businesses.

COMMUNITY

As the fireworks went off on New Year's Eve, I looked around at all of the residents who were watching beside me and again realized how incredibly lucky we are to live in Bethlehem. We were the only community in the Capital District to hold a First Night celebration, and while it was scaled back and entirely outside, it was safe and it was an invigorating way to send out 2021 and welcome in 2022.

The event also showed how flexible and adaptable our community has been during the pandemic, and how much strength we can draw from our neighbors. There is a feel to Bethlehem. We are welcoming, we are warm, we care about the wellbeing of our neighbors, and we are grateful for the quality of life we have here.

We are also a community of action. Throughout the pandemic, we have continued to advance important initiatives – through the town, through our schools, through our neighborhoods, and through our many and varied businesses – because in Bethlehem we get things done.

Tonight, I'm going to walk through the many, many things we accomplished in 2021, and identify a few of the things we're looking to do in 2022. Because pandemic or no, economic challenges or no, in Bethlehem, we get things done.

STAFF

Over the last 4 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 12 years, our town workforce has dropped from 241 in 2009 to 209 in 2022. That's 22 fewer people getting work done in a Town with more physical infrastructure than ever before along with ever growing expectations for the types of services our Town government should be delivering or is mandated to deliver – regardless of COVID-19.

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 2022,

- 67% 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
- 12% for the Town of Bethlehem.

So for every property tax dollar you pay in 2022, the Town of Bethlehem will only see 12 cents. The remaining 88 cents go elsewhere.

2021 IN REVIEW

Let’s take a look at what you get for 12 cents on your property tax dollar. In 2021:

- Our **Public Works** department
 - delivered 1.6 billion gallons of clean drinking water to almost 12,000 homes and businesses
 - through 229 miles of pipes,
 - including 1,670 fire hydrants.
 - We also processed 1.6 billion gallons of sewage, and the effluent from the plant was cleaner than the Hudson River it flows into
- Our **Highway** department
 - built and rebuilt more than 3,500’ of sidewalks
 - paved almost 20 miles of roads to keep them free from potholes
 - plowed through several snowstorms. Plowing is a massive undertaking because we’re responsible for clearing 180 miles of roads. Considering, that we plow in two directions, it means we clear around 360 miles of road with each plow pass through town, which is the equivalent of plowing from Delmar to Washington, DC.
 - Clearing sidewalks, a service fewer other towns provide, is similarly challenging. Bethlehem has 43 miles of sidewalks, which is the equivalent of plowing a sidewalk all the way to Bennington, VT at less than 10 mph.
 - collected 1,800,000 cubic feet of yard waste – a cubic foot is roughly the size of a basketball, so imagine a pile of almost 2 million basketballs stretched along 360 miles of roadsides, and you’ll have a sense of what we clear from your lawns each year
 - rather than dumping all this yard waste into a landfill, we turned it into more than half a million cubic feet of compost and wood mulch at our state of the art Compost Facility – composting yard waste not only generates revenue for the Town, but it helps promote healthy gardens and landscapes, and reduces the greenhouse gas emissions that are driving climate change

- we also launched our new food scraps composting program, converting about 2,700 cubic feet of scraps into “full circle compost” which is absolute treasure for our gardens – Bethlehem is the only municipal facility in the Capital Region currently capable of receiving and composting food scraps, and we are working hard to expand it further in 2022 and beyond
- Our wonderful **Parks** department
 - hosted more than 36,500+ pool visitors, which is particularly impressive because the summer was so rainy; and
 - gave swim lessons to more than 430 kids.
 - We also created strong partnerships with the Bethlehem Public Library and the Albany County Recreation Dept to expand our programs and events;
 - We also rolled out three wonderful new amenities:
 - A. We held a ribbon cutting for the new Normans Kill Ravines Nature Park. We are working closely with a professional trail design firm and incredible volunteers to create miles of new trails in this new 147-acre park – which is just 10 acres smaller than Elm Ave Park – so people can enjoy its beautiful mix of forests and ravines, wetlands and streams, and more than a half mile of Normans Kill river shoreline;
 - B. We debuted the new Mobile Stage. This terrific new stage was paid for entirely with grant money that was secured by Assemblymember Pat Fahy – Pat: thank you for always working for Bethlehem’s wellbeing! Last year we hosted 9 performances on it at Elm Ave Park, but in the future we plan to move it to other public spaces across town to make it easier for everyone to enjoy music, performances, and more.
 - C. We also opened the brand new Dive Pool, continuing our community’s legacy of exceptional recreational facilities. This project took a massive amount of work by our Engineering Division and Parks & Rec staff, and I am grateful that we had such good, dedicated people to guide this challenging project to completion in the midst of a pandemic and a challenging construction market.
- Our **Police** department
 - patrolled 283,000 miles (big town – 52 miles²) and
 - answered 27,500 calls for service
 - We also engaged in a rigorous Police Reform & Reinvention Collaborative planning process in partnership with an incredible 19-member Advisory Committee. The final plan and its recommendations are more comprehensive and in depth than any other suburban Capital Region community’s. The plan highlighted areas of success by our department, and issues that we need to work to address not just within our department, but within our community as a whole. Most importantly, this effort was truly a collaborative effort between our Police Department and our community. At times it was wrenching, but throughout everyone had the common goal of making our Town as fair, just, and equitable as possible.
- The **Delmar-Bethlehem Emergency Medical Service** is a nonprofit partner with the town that
 - responded to more than 4,000 calls in 2021,
 - transported 2,700+ people to hospital, and
 - did this with 57 volunteers who gave more than 15,000 hours of service.
 - their work was so outstanding that Delmar-Bethlehem EMS last year received the 2021 Community Caregivers Public Service Award for their tireless effort, consistent presence, and unwavering dedication to our community.
- Our **Senior Services** department does everything

- Our volunteers drove more than 52,000 miles taking residents to doctors’ visits, and more. This was scaled back from the number of miles we logged before the pandemic, but it reflected our Senior Services Department’s steadfast commitment to protecting the health of the residents we serve AND the volunteers who step up to help.
- We also adjusted our programming to try to maintain as many community connections as possible for our older residents. Isolation is one of the most insidious side effects of the pandemic, and our team worked tirelessly to find new, innovative ways to keep people involved and interacting.
- Our Senior Services team also partnered with the Town’s Office of Emergency Management and Albany County Sheriff’s Department to facilitate two rounds of vaccinations, paying particular attention to older homebound and less mobile residents who needed additional support.

These are the things you can readily see.

Yet like the preparation of a big family feast, much of our work takes place behind the scenes.

- **Senior Services** runs our **food pantry**. Last year, they supported more than 1,300 visits to the food pantry, distributing food and other necessities to help families in need
- Our **Assessor’s** office
 - helped people get tax exemptions on more than 8,000 properties (which is a lot, considering 13,837 total in town), and
 - processed 931 property sales
- Our excellent **Courts** handled more than 5,000 traffic and criminal cases
 - And they did this following ever shifting state guidelines on COVID safety protocols
- Our **Clerk’s** office is always busy. Last year, the 2 staff in this office
 - issued 107 marriage licenses,
 - notarized hundreds documents, and
 - spent 100s of hours processing FOIL requests (which is a critical part of open, transparent government). We get an average of more than 1 FOIL request per business day.
- Our **Building Division**
 - Conducted more than 4,250 inspections to ensure buildings were safe;
 - Processed more than 1,300 building permits for everything from single family homes to pools and decks; and
 - Investigated more than 200 neighbor complaints which ranged from tenants concerned about housing conditions to neighbors having junk vehicles stored on their property (and everything in between)! Handling neighbor complaints involves patience, knowledge of the codes, and supreme problem solving skills. We are fortunate to have such a great team working productively and professionally to help our neighbors live side by side.
- Our **IT Department** did an outstanding job adjusting our systems to support staff working from home or from the office, giving us the flexibility we needed to continue the delivery of critical services regardless of the pandemic.
- Finally, our **Comptroller’s** office ensures financial accountability, and we
 - again aced our annual audits
 - again had an outstanding fiscal stress score.

BIG THINGS IN 2022

All of these outstanding services will continue thanks to our hard-working town employees. But I'd like to now walk through some of the highlights I'm looking forward to in 2022.

Green Energy Hub

Two huge economic development projects have been in the news of late.

- In the Port of Albany, Equinor, BP, and Marmen Welcon will be constructing the first offshore wind tower manufacturing facility in the United States. Let me say that again: *the first offshore wind tower manufacturing facility in the United States will be here in Bethlehem.*
- Complementing this project, Plug Power will be constructing a new fuel-cell manufacturing facility in the Vista Park. Together, these manufacturing sites are projected to bring more than 2,000 good-paying, green-energy jobs to Bethlehem.
- This astonishing growth of green energy industry in Bethlehem is a reflection of our business-friendly climate, our commitment to economic growth, and our commitment to tackling the challenges of climate change. The future is green, and the green energy future is right here in Bethlehem.

Economic Development

These two projects are great examples of economic growth in our town, and they are part of Bethlehem's ongoing efforts to support the growth of business of all sizes.

- In 2022, we will be continuing our micro-enterprise grant program with a 4th round of grants to help new businesses launch and established businesses grow.
- This month, we welcomed a new Senior Economic Developer to help guide entrepreneurs to state resources and through permitting and other processes.
- He will also work with the Bethlehem Industrial Development Agency and Bethlehem Chamber of Commerce to help catalyze the growth of support businesses near the two green energy facilities and throughout the town's industrial corridors, new businesses that will create more jobs, expanded services, and more opportunities in our town.

Comp Plan Update

Growth in our community is a complex issue. Some see it as a threat to the things that drew us and our families to Bethlehem in the first place. Others see it as a natural part of a town's ongoing history.

- Either way, Bethlehem is growing and will continue to grow. The challenge for us therefore is not whether but how our community expands, and what we can do to guide this growth so it supports and even enhances the things that make each hamlet, and our town as a whole, such wonderful places to live and work.
- We are in the closing months of the first complete update of our Town's comprehensive plan in 15 years. This effort is being led by an amazing advisory committee that has put in countless hours working with town staff, consultants, and community members to identify what makes Bethlehem such a great community, and what we need to do to keep it this way as we continue to grow, and how to make Bethlehem even better.

In addition to economic growth, we will be moving forward with a range of initiatives to advance the vision of the Comprehensive Plan Update.

Farms & Green Spaces

Over the last 4 years, we have protected more farms and green spaces than in the previous 25 years combined.

- From the Amsler Farm in North Bethlehem to an expanded Henry Hudson Park in Selkirk, the new Normans Kill Ravines Park in Delmar and Elsmere, the BioReserve conservation easement in Glenmont, and more, we have gone far beyond talking about the importance of farms and green spaces to actively working with interested landowners to protect them.
- We are working so hard on this because we cannot just assume that because a property is green today it will be that way forever. Working as an environmental advocate focused on land protection for more than 20 years taught me that if a property is not conserved, it will be developed. It might be in 5 years, it might be in 50 years, but it will be developed unless a community steps up, takes responsibility, and works with an interested property owner to take the property to a different future.
- Taking responsibility as a community, however, usually means paying for it. We cannot as a municipality simply forbid a property owner from developing their land. That would be illegal, and that's not how we do things in Bethlehem.
- As one of only two municipalities in New York with an Open Space Coordinator, we are committed to conserving treasured farms and green spaces in Bethlehem, in partnership with willing and interested landowners, and with a commitment to do our part to pay for it.

Historic Preservation

Another element of our town that has been highlighted throughout the Comprehensive Plan Update process has been the importance of our community's history. Like green spaces, our history can easily be lost if it is taken for granted or, worse, ignored and forgotten.

- We are undertaking real steps to try to keep that from happening.
- Last year, a dedicated team of volunteers partnered with our Town Historian to create our first electronic, georeferenced inventory of cultural and historic resources in town.
- This will be an important tool to informing planning decisions, and I am committed to creating a committee to continue building our understanding of historic buildings and neighborhoods, and also start identifying incentives we can introduce to help ensure they persist not just as part of our history but also as part of our future.
- I am also excited for the Town to be moving forward in partnership with the Bethlehem Historical Association this year to begin restoration of the historic Cedar Hill Schoolhouse in Selkirk. After serving as a school for more than 100 years, the little red schoolhouse today is a museum with lively exhibits. We are able to start restoration of this building thanks to state funding secured for us by Assemblymember Pat Fahy. Thank you, Pat!

Sustainability

History carries many lessons for us, but when we look at our future, and frankly if we look at the present, we cannot ignore the devastating challenges climate change is creating. We see it locally in our strange new winter weather patterns, hotter summers, and more.

- Facilitating the creation of green energy jobs that will help move our society away from our dependence on fossil fuels is important. But we also have to act on a finer scale.
- Discussions in the Comprehensive Plan Update process have explored ways to help make new buildings more energy efficient, limiting the addition of more gas pumps, requiring new buildings to be wired for electric chargers (just as most homes are now wired for electric stoves and dryers), and more. All of these issues are important and merit hard and serious consideration.
- One action that the Town is working on now is transitioning our vehicle fleet to electric or cleaner hybrids. Last year, we installed a charging station at Town Hall and purchased our first electric vehicle which is used by our Building Division – both funded with state grants. We've partnered with the Capital District Transportation Authority to review our entire fleet

and identify options that we can move on now and the infrastructure changes we'll need to undertake to support them.

- Last year we also installed 10 public electric vehicle charging ports at Town Hall, Elm Ave Park, and the town parking lot in Delmar by the rail trail. Council member Maureen Cunningham was a key leader of this effort, and I look forward to continuing to work with her to advance it even further. Thank you, Maureen!

Accessibility

Another theme in our Comprehensive Plan Update process has been a recognition that we want our community to be accessible for people with all forms of mobility, and whether they are driving, riding, or walking.

- To this end, in 2021, I tripled our annual investment in sidewalk construction and maintenance, and I have worked with our Town Comptroller to identify a way for us to continue this unprecedented investment in pedestrian safety next year and for years to come.
- Construction of the Glenmont Roundabout and Sidewalk Project will wrap up this spring, not only alleviating chronic congestion in one of our busiest commercial centers, but adding more than a mile of sidewalks to connect the Glenmont Elementary School to nearby neighborhoods.
- This year, I will be working to launch a public safety campaign in partnership with our terrific Bicycle & Pedestrian Committee to get drivers to SLOW DOWN and respect crosswalks. Of all the resident concerns I hear throughout the year, and I hear a lot, speeding drivers and not stopping at crosswalks are two of the most common. And they're coming from every hamlet and every neighborhood in town.
- Also this year, our Parks & Rec Department will be launching a comprehensive ADA assessment of our entire park system. Our goal will be to understand which of our park facilities – whether fishing platforms, picnic tables, or gathering places – are accessible, which are not, and where we need to invest to make our parks welcoming to people with all forms of mobility.

Police Reform & Reinvention

Shifting gears but continuing the theme of safety, we have been and will continue to work to advance the recommendations of the Police Reform & Reinvention Collaborative Plan.

- Over the last year, our Police Department has implemented a new system for more effectively gathering data on traffic stops and other public interactions. These data will help answer questions about patterns in how traffic tickets are issued that were flagged in the Collaborative planning process.
- They expanded community policing efforts with the introduction of bike patrols and participation in more community events, introduced more robust training in mental health services and de-escalation techniques, and made it easier for community members to share complaints and comments about interactions with our officers.
- They are also partnering with the Albany County Sheriff's Department's ACCORD program to provide enhanced mental health services to community members in need.

We will continue to implement the Plan's recommendations in 2022 and beyond with the introduction of a formal Town Board Liaison, and are continuing to explore options for introducing body cameras.

- I said this repeatedly last year, but I want to say it again tonight. Bethlehem's police officers are part of our community. They are our neighbors. Their children are in classrooms beside our own. Their families work in local businesses. They coach teams, volunteer as fire fighters, and so much more. As our Chief of Police Gina Cocchiara noted, the Bethlehem Police Department today is very different from twenty years ago. The warrior mentality has

been replaced over the years by a more service-oriented approach that emphasizes community service and respect.

- Black lives matter in Bethlehem – in our government, our schools, and our community – and I am proud of the ongoing commitment I have seen in our Police Department and our community to achieving greater justice, equity, and fairness in Bethlehem, not just in words, but in actions.

Volunteers

The core of our Police Reform & Reinvention Collaborative process, and the core of many of our Town actions, was volunteers. Volunteers:

- make thousands of trips to support our older residents,
- help families in need at our food pantry,
- build trails in our Normans Kill Ravines Park and maintain mountain bike trails in our North Bethlehem Park,
- built a digital cultural resources inventory,
- serve on committees guiding our Comprehensive Plan Update, working to make our streets safer, and partnering with our Police Department to bring greater justice and equity to our community.

Volunteers run the historic museum in the Cedar Hill Schoolhouse in Selkirk.

- Volunteers raise funds for action, such as purchasing a new van for our Senior Services Department through the nonprofit Bethlehem Senior Projects. Residents matched an incredible gift of \$25,000 from volunteers Mark Bryant and Lisa Callahan with more than \$22,000 in donations through the nonprofit Friends of Bethlehem Parks & Recreation to help build new trails in the Normans Kill Ravines nature park.

People make a community, and volunteers help make our community run.

CONCLUSION

The last two years have been challenging for our community. The pandemic has made it hard to connect, has frayed nerves and stretched patience, has caused agonizing illness and taken community members from us forever. It has changed the way we interact, hiding smiles and forcing us to learn to smile with our eyes.

The pandemic has also underscored how important living in a community like Bethlehem can be. I saw this in the faces of kids heading to the Splash Park and Dive Pool this summer. I saw it on the gloves of Bethlehem Garden Club members beautifying gardens in public spaces. I saw it in the eyes of families at the Menorah and Tree lightings, and in the eyes of neighbors as the First Night fireworks illuminated a cold winter night.

Bethlehem is a strong community and we are resilient. We can cope with the hard times and we will build for a brighter future. Despite the challenges, there were many bright spots in 2021, and as I look forward to 2022, I see hope, opportunity, and action ahead.

Thank you all for attending and watching tonight, and I look forward to working with all of you in the coming months to keep Bethlehem moving forward together.