

State of the Town Address for Bethlehem, NY

David VanLuven, Town Supervisor – January 25, 2023

WELCOME

Good evening and thank you for joining this State of the Town address. It's so nice to have so many people together to celebrate Bethlehem!

This is my sixth State of the Town address, and it's still striking to look back and see how much we have accomplished as a community. It's also inspiring to me because this address gives me the opportunity to highlight the great work of the people who work for this town: their creativity, their measured patience, and always their dedication to supporting our residents and businesses.

THANK YOU

While everyone is still relatively fresh, I want to take a moment to say thank you. I won't be able to acknowledge everyone, because so many people do so much in this town.

- Thank you to the American Legion for organizing the Memorial Day Parade and Our Town Bethlehem for organizing the Turkey Trot.
- Thanks to all the businesses that support our town, whether fireworks on the Fourth of July, First Night Celebrations, sports teams, and every charitable community organization in the area.
- Thanks to the incredibly dedicated first responders in our fire departments, Delmar Bethlehem Emergency Medical Service, and Police Department. You are always there when we need you, and we're lucky to know that you always will be.
- Thanks to the volunteer groups who help our neighbors and community, including Scout troops who collect food, Eagle Scouts who build projects, the Bethlehem Garden Club who creates beautiful places, religious organizations who support us in so many ways, and nonprofits who help educate our kids, conserve our green spaces, and more.
- Thanks to all of our residents who serve on Town boards and committees, and who volunteer with our staff to support our neighbors.
- And thanks to our wonderful town employees. You are vital to Bethlehem being such a great place to live and work, and we don't express our appreciation nearly enough.

COMMUNITY

Over the last few years, I've frequently talked about how I find optimism and encouragement in Bethlehem whenever I've felt dragged down by vitriolic national discourse. I'm going to shift this theme a bit tonight because we're increasingly seeing that uncivil behavior seep into our local social media discourse.

If one spends much time on different social media platforms, they can easily come to believe the chatter that everyone and everything is terrible. But those narratives are wrong. Today's perpetual election cycles are seemingly addicted to negative posturing. When in reality, we have so much more to be positive about. Because, life is real interactions between real people. And those real interactions strengthen our community and make our lives better. We saw this in wonderful ways throughout 2022: hundreds of families enjoying the First Night fireworks and Summer Concert Series, Scouts gathering goods for the Food Pantry, neighbors laughing together during the Memorial Day Parade, friendly volunteers helping their neighbors. These

real interactions between real people together are what Bethlehem really is. And Bethlehem truly is a remarkable town - in fact, one of the very best in all of New York State.

The COVID-19 pandemic has obviously had a serious effect on our ability to interact and connect. It was wonderful last spring for our masks to come off and to see faces and smiles again. And it's been hard to stay vigilant against COVID as restrictions have eased. But the pandemic is not over – 36 people were hospitalized because of COVID yesterday, the same number as last February. So even though we're tired, we need to continue being careful, thoughtful, respectful, and safe.

And as we do so, I encourage everyone to get offline, to have real interactions, and to participate in our community. Sit down in local coffee shops and eateries. Go to performances at our parks and the library. Shop and support our stores. Get physical by walking, biking, hiking fishing, bowling, or the like. Volunteer with community groups. There are so many ways for us to get offline, get our perspective back on reality, and appreciate how lucky we all are to live in “our town” Bethlehem.

ACTION

In addition to being a community of neighbors, we are also a community of action. Tonight, I'm going to walk through some of the many, many things we accomplished in 2022, and identify a few of the things we're looking to do in 2023. Because in Bethlehem, we get things done.

STAFF

Over the last 5 years, I have steadily emphasized that the Town doesn't deliver services, people do. People plow our roads. People patrol our neighborhoods and protect our wellbeing. 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 13 years, our town workforce has dropped from 241 in 2009 to 224 in 2023. That's 17 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, inflation, and supply chain challenges.

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 2023,

- 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 2023, the Town of Bethlehem will only see 12 cents. The remaining 88 cents go elsewhere.

2022 IN REVIEW

Let's take a look at what you get for 12 cents on your property tax dollar with Bethlehem by the Numbers. In 2022:

- **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 Police department**
 - patrolled 285,000 miles and
 - answered 39,000 calls for service.
 - The incredible men and women of our valued Police Department protect and serve us daily with respect and a true dedication to our wellbeing. I'll talk more about public safety a little later on in tonight's address.
- **Our Highway department**
 - built and rebuilt more than 9,400' of sidewalks, which is an unprecedented level of investment that reflects our commitment to improving this vital and long neglected network.
 - We also paved 14 miles of roads to keep them free from potholes, and
 - 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. And most storms require multiple passes.
 - 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.
 - Our Highway crews also collected more than 1,800,000 cubic feet of yard waste. A cubic foot is roughly the size of a basketball, so imagine almost 2 million basketballs stretched along hundreds of miles of roadsides, and you'll have a sense of what we clear from your lawns each year.
- In 2022, we created a new **Recycling & Composting** department
 - who turned all that yard waste 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, it helps promote healthy gardens and landscapes, and reduces the greenhouse gas emissions that are driving climate change.

- We also expanded our food scraps composting program, converting about 8,000 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 even further in 2023 and beyond.
- Our **wonderful Parks** department
 - hosted more than 42,000 pool visitors, and
 - gave swim lessons to more than 500 kids.
 - We also continued strong partnerships with the Bethlehem Public Library and the Albany County Recreation Dept to deliver a wide variety of programs and events, including 14 concerts and performances on the mobile stage at Elm Ave Park, Henry Hudson Park, and South Bethlehem Park.
- **The Delmar-Bethlehem Emergency Medical Service** is a nonprofit partner with the town that
 - responded to more than 4,300 calls,
 - transported more than 2,700 people to hospitals, and
 - did this with 55 volunteers who gave more than 15,000 hours of service.
- **Our Senior Services** department does everything.
 - Our volunteers drove more than 50,000 miles taking residents to doctors’ visits, hair appointments, and more.
 - We also continued our programming to try to maintain as many community connections as possible for our older residents, including knitting sessions, workshops, book discussions, and exercise classes. Isolation is one of the greatest risks to our older neighbors, and our team worked tirelessly to find new, innovative ways to keep people involved and interacting.

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 1,400 visits to the food pantry, distributing food and other necessities to help families in need.
- Our excellent **Courts** handled **more** than 5,000 traffic and criminal cases, while upholding the law with fairness, firmness and compassion.
- Our **Clerk’s** office is always busy. Last year, the 2 staff in this office
 - issued 125 marriage licenses,
 - registered 1,600 dogs,
 - 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.
 - This will be Nanci Moquin’s 14th year serving as our Town Clerk, and she has done a brilliant job. Thank you, Nanci!
- **Finally, our Building Division**
 - conducted more than 4,000 inspections to ensure buildings were safe;
 - processed more than 1,100 building permits for everything from single family homes to major manufacturing facilities; and
 - investigated more than 225 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.

That's Bethlehem by the Numbers. There are a few additional accomplishments in 2022 that I'd like to highlight this evening, and also talk about how we'll continue them in 2023.

AWARD WINNING COMP PLAN

Last summer, we completed the Bethlehem Forward comprehensive plan update. This was the culmination of a 3-year, community-based assessment of what we love about the Town of Bethlehem and what we want our town to be in the future.

The comprehensive plan is important because Bethlehem is a dynamic community that is growing and will continue to grow because people want to live and work here. This Comprehensive Plan Update provides a new vision for how we can guide this growth to support the elements that make our town strong today, and to make it stronger and more sustainable in the future.

We as a town are so grateful to the hundreds of residents who participated in the planning process through surveys, dozens of community meetings, and more – all during the worst pandemic in a century. This process was led by the Town's outstanding Planning Department, particularly Planning Director Rob Leslie, Deputy Director Leslie Lombardo, and Senior Planner Nate Owens. And it was guided by an incredible 15-member volunteer advisory committee who represented all seven hamlets and brought a wide range of technical expertise to the Bethlehem Forward effort.

This plan is called an update because it builds upon the 2005 Comprehensive Plan, but it is also a wholly new plan that draws on 15 years of experience implementing that earlier plan. Its principles, goals, and recommendations stem from core community values and a vision that recognizes the many challenges we're facing now and the growing challenges we will face for many years to come.

Development is a key consideration of the Comprehensive Plan because responsible, thoughtful development has and will continue to enrich our town. It builds our neighborhoods, provides commercial space to deliver goods and services, and provides jobs. Our town departments will continue to foster clear communications and good working relationships with those who invest in Bethlehem.

A Bethlehem resident who works on community planning with municipalities across New York State recently told me that this plan is a model for what an effective Comprehensive Plan should be: ambitious and bold, while also pragmatic and focused on results. It is so good, in fact, that the American Planning Association's Upstate NY Chapter gave Bethlehem an award in recognition of the plan's innovation, engagement, and effectiveness.

Code Updates: But completing the plan doesn't mean we're done. The Town recently received a \$90,000 state grant to undertake updates to our zoning codes that reflect our Bethlehem Forward vision and smart growth ideals. This won't be a simple task – few things that deliver real benefits are – but it's important because it will help us translate our great ideas into real actions that deliver long-term benefits.

Through this effort, we'll begin tackling a variety of challenges, including the following four.

- First, in response to calls from the community and Governor Hochul's new statewide housing vision, we will need to assess ways we can incentivize housing construction that provides a wider range of housing choices, including affordability. Bethlehem needs to be open to people of all incomes, whether they are laborers, teachers, nonprofit workers, professors, attorneys, or doctors.

- Second, we need to update our conservation subdivision standards to make them more effective at protecting open space while also providing incentives for affordable housing, complete streets improvements, and historic preservation.
- Third, we need to identify ways to guide new development to protect natural resources and improve energy efficiency to make our community more resilient to climate change challenges.
- Fourth, we need to identify and implement options to support agricultural uses, such as allowing more flexible land uses permitted by right and not requiring municipal approval.

HISTORIC PRESERVATION

We are also working to identify ways to promote historic preservation. At the end of last year, we sadly said farewell to Susan Leath as our Town Historian. Susan did an incredible job as Town Historian for 15 years, and we are so much better because of her vision and leadership.

Fortunately, we have a wonderful new Town Historian, Bill Ketzer, who is committed to continuing Susan's great work. Over the last two years, Bill worked with Susan, Georgia Fishburn, and me to convert a townwide cultural resource inventory from the 1990s into a digital format that we've integrated into our Town's computer mapping system. These data are now available to inform Planning staff and Planning Board members as they make decisions.

The challenge, however, is figuring out how to use this information. I have therefore formed a small working group that Bill is leading that will research next steps that the Town can take to promote historic preservation. Our focus is on incentives for conservation, not restrictions, as these positive approaches have worked best in other Northeastern municipalities. The work of this small group is a vital first step to ensuring that historic buildings and neighborhoods persist not just as part of our history, but also as part of our future.

FARMLAND & OPEN SPACE PROTECTION

One of my priorities when I first ran for Town Board in 2015 and Town Supervisor in 2017 was protecting open space in town. Over 30 years of working as an environmental advocate, I've found that if lands are not protected, they will be developed. It might be in 5 years, it might be in 50 years, but they will be developed. Because of this, if we want treasured green spaces to remain green, we have to take responsibility and pay for them. This isn't saying that developments are bad. Rather, it's a recognition that just because a place has been green for as long as we can remember doesn't mean it will always be.

Over the last 5 years, we've worked hard to get past talk about the importance of open space protection, and get into the act of actually protecting it. And we've been extremely successful. Two years ago, we cut the ribbon on the new Normans Kill Ravines nature park. At 147 acres, it's only slightly smaller than Elm Ave Park. From 2018 through 2021, we protected 252 acres, including one of the last large undeveloped properties in North Bethlehem, and added 21 acres to Henry Hudson Park. That 4-year total was more than the previous 25 years combined.

But our biggest open space victory came last year with Prop 2, in which residents overwhelmingly voted in favor of protecting 307 acres in Glenmont and Selkirk. These properties include the historic 150+ acre Heath Dairy Farm on three corners of Wemple Rd/Rte 9W which have been growing crops for more than 250 years, plus a 122-acre farm off Clapper Rd and 31 acres on Weisheit Rd.

I've been working on this project for almost 4 years, and thanks to our residents, it is now the largest municipal farmland conservation project in Hudson Valley history. More broadly, I've yet to hear of anything remotely as ambitious as Prop 2 in any municipality anywhere outside of Long Island.

I'm incredibly proud of this effort for two reasons. First, these wonderful properties, which have been growing crops since at least the Revolutionary War, will be able to continue growing crops, not subdivisions, for another 250 years. And second, it shows that we in Bethlehem don't just talk about the importance of open space, we're willing to work with interested landowners and pay for it.

Next Steps: Once we have closed on the properties, we will start a process for envisioning what we want to happen there in the future. While we work together as a community on this process, we will partner with area farmers to keep the land in agriculture, just as it has been for decades. But we can also start moving in so many potential directions: agri-tourism, traditional agriculture, innovation center to support new farmers and local food production, farm therapy for military veterans, and more. With the land protected we have time, and I'm so excited to use this time to chart a visionary future for these wonderful properties.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Businesses large and small are vital parts of the Bethlehem community and critical drivers of our strong local economy. We are working hard as a town government to support these businesses, and we are fortunate to have strong partners in the Bethlehem Chamber of Commerce and the Bethlehem Industrial Development Agency to advance these efforts.

- Last year, we distributed 7 microenterprise grants to help new businesses open and existing businesses expand. These targeted investments are important to support the small, locally owned businesses that are so important to Bethlehem.
- And Bethlehem is a great place to do business, as shown by 12 new businesses opening last year, ranging in size from a vintage video game shop in Glenmont to the new world-class 350,000 ft² Plug Power hydrogen fuel cell manufacturing facility in Slingerlands.
- The Plug Power facility joins the long list of strong industries in Bethlehem. The Owens Corning Plant manufactures all the pink fiberglass batt insulation sold in the Northeastern US. Air Products literally makes valuable gases for commercial and residential use out of thin air. CSX operates one of the largest rail freight yards east of the Mississippi. The list goes on. And I'm excited to see, and will continue to monitor progress on construction of the Port of Albany's offshore wind tower manufacturing facility. This facility will not only help bring clean energy into the grid and good green jobs to the Capital Region, it is finally remediating a 50-year old coal ash landfill.
- I want to take a moment to thank County Executive Dan McCoy and his great team – including Kevin O'Connor, Dan Lynch, and Luc Rogers – for bringing Plug Power to Bethlehem. Without his leadership and vision, this wonderful new facility likely would have been built in a different county. Thank you, Executive McCoy, for your incredible support of our town!

Looking forward, there are a few more major initiatives for 2023 that I want to highlight tonight.

TRAFFIC SAFETY

The first is traffic safety. I hear a lot of concerns from the community about many things, but more than anything else, traffic safety is the one I hear most. These concerns take many forms,

but ultimately they all pretty much fall into people driving too quickly, and people not respecting the safety of pedestrians and cyclists.

Improving traffic safety comes with a lot of challenges, including faster cars, electronic distractions, and short tempers. Can anything be done? The answer is: of course. We're Bethlehem. And we're moving strategically on several traffic safety projects this year with the ultimate objective of making our roads safer for drivers, cyclists, and pedestrians alike.

- First, we're working with a professional communications firm to create a **Traffic Safety education campaign**. The two foci will be getting drivers to slow down, and reminding drivers that Bethlehem's roads are for everyone: drivers, cyclists, and pedestrians.
- Second, recognizing that physical changes are needed to transition drivers to slower speeds on particularly problematic roads, we are introducing **speed humps** to selected residential streets. Speed humps are different from speed bumps. Speed bumps are common in parking lots and are abrupt and high, forcing drivers to almost stop to get over them. Speed humps are 15-20 feet wide and only 3-4 inches tall, so cars can go over them fairly smoothly at 25mph, but not 35mph. They've worked well in other communities like Voorheesville and Colonie, and last fall we worked with a neighborhood to put in our first speed humps on Thatcher Road in Selkirk. They're also working really well, so we're now working with several other neighborhoods with higher volume, relatively fast roads to put in more this year.
- Third, we've brought in **traffic engineers** to assess our options for making two of our busiest streets safer. Blessing Road is the only road connecting North Bethlehem with Slingerlands. It is narrow and has more than 6,000 cars traveling on it every day, so is not welcoming for pedestrians. We are therefore looking at options for improvements. Kenwood Ave between the Four Corners and the Bypass is a residential street with 2 schools and almost 4,000 cars every day. We are assessing this busy residential street to find ways to make it safer for pedestrians, including children walking to school, and to slow down cars.
- Fourth, we are continuing to invest aggressively in **sidewalk improvements**. Our 43-mile sidewalk system was neglected for decades, and it wasn't until my predecessor that the Town initiated a regular program for restoring and building them. I worked with the Town Comptroller to triple our annual investment in sidewalk restoration, but we have so much catching up to do that it will be years before we can get the system up to the point of being as smooth and accessible as we'd all like.
- Finally, all of these efforts will help move us to the point where we can change our **residential speed limit** from 30 to 25 mph. We need to do this preliminary work so that the speed limit change will actually result in slower speeds, and we will have to do a lot of work after the official change to ensure that the slower speeds become part of our community's culture. But I remain committed to changing the residential speed limit as part of a broader campaign to make our streets even safer for drivers, cyclists, and pedestrians.

PUBLIC SAFETY

Two years ago, I worked in close partnership with our Police Department and community members to create the only suburban municipal Police Reform & Reinvention Collaborative Plan that seriously considered issues of equity and set forth ambitious recommendations to advance it.

Our Police Department has worked hard to implement these recommendations, including expanded community policing with bike patrols and community events like Coffee with a Cop and Lights in the Park, expanded training in mental health services and de-escalation techniques, and easier ways for community members to share complaints and comments about interactions with our officers.

This year, we are investing in new body cameras for our officers and replacing the car cameras in all of our police vehicles. This action was a central recommendation of the Police Reform & Reinvention Plan, one that was strongly supported by the community AND our police officers.

As I've said repeatedly over the last two years, 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. Our Police Department today delivers a more service-oriented approach that emphasizes community service and respect while effectively enforcing our laws and protecting us. The more I have worked with our Police Department, the more convinced I am that they are what all municipal Police Departments should be striving to become.

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.

PARK IMPROVEMENTS

Finally, Bethlehem has a dozen parks across all 7 hamlets that collectively see many tens of thousands of visitors each year.

While our parks are all well-loved, they are not as accessible to people with different mobilities as we would like. We are therefore in the midst of an **ADA assessment** of our entire park system to identify improvements that will allow our system to be accessible and welcoming to everyone. My understanding is that we are the first municipality in the Capital Region to undertake a comprehensive ADA assessment, and one of the few in the entire state to do so.

We are also working to improve our parks.

- This year, we are scheduled to replace the playground in Selkirk Park with state funding delivered by Assemblymember Pat Fahy, and to restore the basketball court in South Bethlehem Park. We're also working through the state paperwork to receive \$175K that Senator Neil Breslin delivered for the construction of a new pavilion in South Bethlehem Park, likely next year. These neighborhood parks are important gathering places where children can play outside and neighbors can come together.
- And speaking of being outside, we will be continuing construction of a trail system through the new Normans Kill Ravines nature park in Delmar and Elsmere. These trails will open the park's gorgeous landscape of forests, wetlands, ravines, and half-a-mile of Normans Kill shoreline to visitors. Assemblymember Pat Fahy delivered \$150K for this trail work, and we are working in close partnership with volunteer mountain bikers to stretch these funds as far as we can.
- We are also scheduled to restore the Olympic Pool and mechanical room at the Elm Ave Park pool complex this fall. Over the last decade we have built a new Splash Park, restored the Learn-to-Swim Pool, and completely rebuilt the Dive Pool. We now need to restore the Olympic Pool, which after 50 years is starting to show its age.

We are undertaking all of these improvements because parks are an integral part of Bethlehem. They are used by people of all ages, and they are common grounds where we can come together as a community to appreciate our neighbors and our wonderful town.

CONCLUSION

2023 will be my 6th year as Town Supervisor, and it is such an honor to serve in this role. This job has introduced me to the incredible services that our town employees deliver on a daily basis, services that have real, beneficial impacts on our quality of life. It has helped me understand that while we are a town of many hamlets, we are fundamentally one community, and a strong one at that. It has also given me the opportunity to work with business owners and residents on so many important things that will benefit us for generations.

Bethlehem is a wonderful community with great businesses and good neighbors. I encourage all of you, as regularly as possible, to step away from social media chatter and get out to gatherings like this for real interactions with real neighbors. And to be reminded, again and again, how lucky we are to live here.

Thank you.