

State of the Town Address for Bethlehem, NY
David VanLuven, Town Supervisor – January 24, 2024
Contact: dvanluven@townofbethlehem.org, 518-801-2454 mobile

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!

- Welcome elected officials in attendance
- Thank yous

Let me begin by saying that I am pleased to report that the state of our town is strong. We are a safe, vibrant, beautiful, and creative town, one that is admired throughout the Capital District and beyond.

This is my seventh State of the Town address, and every time it's 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.

COMMUNITY

Those of you who have heard me speak before know that my State of the Town addresses usually open with some sort of recognition of how lucky we are to live in such a wonderful town.

Last year, I exhorted people to get out and interact with our community rather than forming opinions of it and our neighbors based what we read on social media, because too much social media content is just online road rage.

This year, I'm encouraging people to do the same thing, but not because so much social media is nonsense, but because of terrible global events whose effects are rippling into our community.

The recent terror attack in Israel, for example, has resulted in war and has had a tremendous impact on our community – especially those who feel threatened due to their faith, and those who tragically have suffered personal losses. In addition, the unprovoked war in Ukraine threatens unchecked aggression and global instability.

As these international events affect us locally, we as a community grieve with our neighbors and stand as their friends as an extended support system. We do this because the community of Bethlehem is a family. Our lives are interconnected, which is why we must and will work honestly together to support greater understanding, commit to respect, and foster civil discourse.

Our town categorically rejects anti-Semitism, Islamaphobia, and hate in all forms.

Our town strives to promote greater compassion towards every one of all backgrounds, religions, and beliefs.

Our town is a caring community – where neighbors live together with respect and friendship.

As we navigate the local effects of these global events, I hope that everyone can get out and see this community, to feel our inter-connectedness, and to find hope here at home. 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 find hope and support from our neighbors, and to 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 2023 and identify a few of the things we’re looking to do in 2024.

There are some who say that government should do the bare minimum and avoid difficult large initiatives. I couldn’t disagree more. I believe that the role of government is to provide key services and to tackle hard challenges. And we’re doing this, because as you’ll see tonight and every day, our Town government gets things done.

STAFF

Over the last 6 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 14 years, our town workforce has dropped from 241 in 2009 to 225 in 2024. That’s 16 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 pandemics, inflation, and budgets.

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 2024,

- 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 2024, the Town of Bethlehem will only see 12 cents. The remaining 88 cents go elsewhere.

2023 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 2023:

- Our **Public Works** department
 - delivered 1.5 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 1.7 billion gallons of sewage, and the effluent from the plant was cleaner than the Hudson River it flowed into.
- Our **Police department**
 - patrolled 300,000 miles (which is twice around the earth, and then to the moon – all in Bethlehem) and
 - answered 44,000 calls for service.
 - The incredible men and women of our Police Department protect and serve us daily with respect and a true dedication to our wellbeing. I'll talk more about public safety and emergency services a little later on in tonight's address.
- Our **Highway department**
 - built and rebuilt more than 11,700' of sidewalks, which is 2,000' more than last year's record-setting total and reflects our commitment to improving this vital and long neglected network.
 - We also paved 10 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 few other towns provide, is similarly challenging. Bethlehem has 45 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 2.2 million cubic feet of yard waste last year. A cubic foot is roughly the size of a basketball, so imagine 2 million 200 thousand basketballs stretched along hundreds of miles of roadsides, and you'll have a sense of what we clear from your lawns each year.
- In 2023, our model **Recycling & Composting** department
 - turned all that yard waste into 675,000 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 more than 13,000 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 2024 and beyond.
- Our **wonderful Parks** department

- hosted more than 34,000 pool visitors, and
- gave swim lessons to more than 650 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 4,400 calls,
 - transported more than 1,900 people to hospitals, and
 - did this with 58 volunteers who gave more than 15,000 hours of service.
- **Our Senior Services** department does everything.
 - Our volunteers drove more than 89,000 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** also runs our **food pantry**. Last year, they supported more than 1,400 visits to the food pantry, distributing almost 14,000 meals and other necessities to help families in need.
- Our excellent and respected **Justice Court** handled **more** than 5,000 new traffic and criminal cases, while upholding the law with fairness, firmness, and compassion.
- Our **Building Division**
 - conducted more than 3,500 inspections to ensure buildings were safe;
 - processed more than 1,000 building permits for everything from swimming pools to multi-family apartment buildings; and
 - investigated more than 240 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.
- **Finally**, our **Clerk’s** office is always busy. Last year, the 2 staff in this office
 - issued 92 marriage licenses,
 - registered nearly 1,700 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.
 - I am thrilled to have Kim Whitsitt joining our team as our new Town Clerk. But I’d like to take a moment to thank Nanci Moquin for her incredible work over 15 years as Town Clerk. Thank you, Nanci, we wish all the very best in retirement!

MAJOR INITIATIVES

That's Bethlehem by the Numbers. There are a few additional accomplishments in 2023 that I'd like to highlight this evening, and also talk about how we'll continue them and more in 2024.

FARMLAND & OPEN SPACE PROTECTION: One of my priorities when I first ran for Town Board in 2015 and for Town Supervisor in 2017 was protecting open space and farmland 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.

Since I became Town Supervisor, we have worked diligently to get past talk about the importance of open space and farmland protection, and get into the act of actually protecting it. And we've been extremely successful. Over the last 6 years, we have protected 625 acres in Bethlehem in partnership with interested landowners. Let me say that again: in just 6 years, we have protected 625 acres in Bethlehem. That's three times the amount of open space protected in the previous 25 years.

Half of this land was protected through the purchase of the Historic Heath Farm, which at 307 acres was the largest municipal farmland conservation project in Hudson Valley history. Now that we've ensured that these acres can always grow crops, not apartments or warehouses, we've brought together an amazing advisory committee to chart a future course for the properties. Future uses they're considering include agro-tourism, traditional agriculture, an innovation center to support new farmers and local food production, farm therapy for military veterans, and more.

But the Historic Heath Farm is not the end of our open space and farmland protection efforts. Two weeks ago, the Town Board and I approved a conservation easement on 66-acres of exceptional forest land in Glenmont that were acquired last year by the Mohawk Hudson Land Conservancy from a paper company. The property will become part of the nonprofit Bioreserve which owns an adjacent 68-acre property that is also protected by the Town with a conservation easement.

And this year, we are planning to close on the acquisition of a beautiful 68-acre property in Selkirk thanks to two landowners who want their land to stay undeveloped forever, and a \$195,000 community forest grant from the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation that will cover 80% of the cost.

ZONING CODE UPDATES: We need to actively protect open space and farmlands because Bethlehem is a dynamic community that is growing and will continue to grow. People want to live and work here.

In 2022, we completed the award-winning Bethlehem Forward Comprehensive Plan Update, which thanks to extensive community involvement provides an updated 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 are now in the midst of updating our Zoning Codes to reflect this vision and to advance the goals and objectives of the Bethlehem Forward Comprehensive Plan Update. In 2023, we held

four public workshops and public Planning Board advisory sessions – in addition to accepting comments directly at other times – to review and get community input on potential zoning code changes.

Key elements of the Bethlehem Forward Comprehensive Plan Update, and in turn the proposed Zoning Code updates, include:

- Creating incentives for developing a greater variety of housing options across the Town (such as accessory apartments, two-family houses, and multi-family buildings). The goal is to provide housing options for a wider range of income levels.
- Focusing new residential development in areas already served within the water and sewer districts. This more efficiently uses our existing utility infrastructure. It will also help rural areas maintain low density development while still providing development options that retain the economic value of rural properties.
- Opening up our commercial areas to mixed uses, because allowing residential units to be built in commercial areas can help support commercial businesses and services.
- Implementing an online/digital application management system to streamline the application process and improve the turnaround time for reviews by our Planning Board and Zoning Board of Appeals.

Our goal is to present recommended code updates to the Town Board by the end of this year, so I strongly encourage everyone to participate in the process, share their views and insights, and help us ensure that as our town continues to grow, we grow responsibly and well. And let's remember that when new houses are built they become homes, and those homes become new neighborhoods that are also filled with folks with hopes and dreams.

ROAD SAFETY: In addition to housing, traffic is a major component of our Bethlehem Forward Comprehensive Plan Update. Related to that, traffic safety is major focus of our Town government. I hear a lot of concerns from community members about many different things, but traffic safety is the one I hear the 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, cyclists, or even other motorists.

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, in 2023 we did a soft launch of the **Bethlehem Safe Streets** traffic safety education campaign, and we're going to launch it in earnest starting this spring. The two foci are getting drivers to slow down, and reminding drivers that Bethlehem's roads are for everyone: drivers, cyclists, and pedestrians. So watch for the logo, put a sign in your yard, but more importantly, let's all take a breath when we're driving and slow down, stop at crosswalks for pedestrians, and please, please, please drive the way we want everyone else to drive in our neighborhoods.
- Second, we are continuing to invest aggressively in **sidewalk improvements**. Our 45-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. When I started as Town Supervisor in 2018, our annual budget for sidewalks was \$50,000. In 2024, it is \$250,000, and I am so appreciative of the Town Board's and our Highway Superintendent's support for

this increase. 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, but with 21,000' of sidewalks restored and built in the last two years and a deep commitment to completing the task, we're on the right track for success.

- Third, we're working hard to make problematic streets safer. In 2023, we launched the **Kenwood Avenue Safety Study** to assess one of our busiest residential streets between the Four Corners and the Bypass for real changes we could make to slow drivers and increase safety. I'm excited to start implementing these improvements this and next year. We also completed the **Cherry Avenue Extension Multi-use Path** study in 2023 and are scheduled to start construction of it this year. When completed, the 10'-wide paved path will connect Kenwood Avenue and the rail trail with the Slingerlands commercial district by the Market 32. And speaking of multi-use trails, we are working hard to get the engineering materials so we can break ground this year on the first phase of a multi-use trail along **Blessing Road** in North Bethlehem.
- 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 started working with the Capital District Transportation Committee last year on the technical and engineering analyses that the State of NY requires before speed limit changes like can be made, and we expect to have this work done later this year. Then, we'll need to develop a local plan for implementing the change, which will need to include consideration of everything from notifying residents to adapting traffic enforcement to paying for and installing hundreds and hundreds of new speed limit signs. It's a huge undertaking, 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.

EMERGENCY SERVICES: Safer streets are an important step towards reducing accidents, but when they do happen, Bethlehem is fortunate to have outstanding emergency services. The Town's five **fire departments** are entirely volunteer, and they spend countless hours in training so they are always ready to help, whether at a traffic accident, a house fire, a brush fire or a dangerous spill on the NY Thruway. Our local firefighters may be volunteers, but when there's an emergency, they are as professional as they come. And on behalf of the Town, I want to thank each department Chief and the outstanding teams they lead.

Just as our fire fighters are community members, our **police officers** are too. 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.

Over the last eight years, I've had the privilege of seeing our officers handle a wide range of situations, from helping individuals through mental health crises to supporting neighbors and family after an unattended death to shoplifting to traffic stops and more. In every instance, I have been impressed by their professionalism and compassion. I am proud to have them supporting us and our community's ongoing commitment to greater justice, equity, and fairness in Bethlehem, not just in words, but in actions. And starting last year, the work of our excellent officers is now recorded on both body and car cameras.

There are three core reasons that our Police Department is so good. First, we are extremely selective about who we hire, which ensures that the officers who join our force are deeply committed to community service and respect. In 2024, we're on course to hire 3 new officers to take over from long-serving officers who have retired. Second, we rigorously train our officers, not just when they start, but throughout their long tenures with our department. And third, our

Police leadership – from Chief Gina Cocchiara through Sergeants – maintain a culture of service, respect, and safety.

Our **emergency medical services** are delivered by professional paramedics and EMTs with the Albany County Sheriff's Department and volunteer EMTs with the nonprofit Delmar-Bethlehem EMS. In the 2024 budget, we dramatically increased our annual payments to Albany County for these services so they could give their professional emergency medical staff competitive, livable wages. This was important not just because they deserve the higher wages, but because it will help the County ensure that the professionals who serve our community are highly qualified and able to handle every emergency.

The nonprofit Delmar-Bethlehem EMS helps hold down our emergency medical service costs with volunteers who in 2023 gave more than 15,000 hours of service time. Like our volunteer firefighters, the highly trained Delmar-Bethlehem EMS emergency medical technicians may be volunteers, but when there's a medical crisis, they are as professional as they come.

PARK ACCESSIBILITY & INFRASTRUCTURE: Shifting topics, I'd like to talk a bit about our incredible park network and the work we're doing to make it even better.

- Last year, we completed an **ADA assessment** of our entire park system to identify improvements that will allow our parks to be more accessible and welcoming to everyone. I believe 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. That assessment is now done, but we're not just putting it on the shelf. Instead, we have built \$100,000 into the 2024 budget to start actively investing in improvements that will help us go beyond talking about the importance of accessibility to actually achieving it.
- We're also steadily investing in restoring and improving our parks. In 2023, we completed installation of a beautiful new playground in **Selkirk Park**. Funding from Assembly member Pat Fahy helped make these improvements possible. This spring and summer, we will be restoring the basketball court at **South Bethlehem Park**, and thanks to an incredibly generous grant of \$175,000 from Senator Neil Breslin, will be constructing a beautiful new pavilion there. Thank you, Senator Breslin! These improvements will complement other improvements at the park, including trails to the Onesquethaw Creek there where community members can fish in one of the region's best trout streams. And speaking of improvements, this spring we will be converting four of our eight tennis courts at Elm Ave Park into 10 **pickleball** courts. Pickleball is the fastest growing sport in America, and a \$50,000 grant from Assemblymember Scott Bendett is key to this improvement. Thank you, Assemblymember Bendett! But wait, there's more! This fall after the pool season ends, we will be relining and restoring the **Olympic Pool** at Elm Ave Park. Over the last 6 years, we have restored the Learn-to-Swim Pool and completely rebuilt the Dive Pool. We have the best pool complex in the Capital Region, and we're working hard to update it so it stays that way.

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.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT: And speaking of getting together, Bethlehem has more than 70 restaurants where people can gather with friends and family for great food, excellent coffee, or exceptional micro-brewed beer. This is notable because 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 all of these businesses, large and small, and we

are fortunate to have strong partners in the Bethlehem Chamber of Commerce, led by former Town Supervisor Terri Egan and the Bethlehem Industrial Development Agency, to advance these efforts.

- Last year, we wrapped up our fourth round of **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. Over the course of the four grant cycles, we have awarded \$700,000 to more than 30 businesses across town. We will be applying to the State for a fifth round of funding later this year to help keep our wonderful local businesses thriving.
- And Bethlehem is a great place to do business, as shown by the many **new businesses** all over town. Our vibrant business districts are going strong, for example:
 - Bellini’s moved to a new location and Las Margaritas opened in Slingerlands;
 - Starbucks and Chipotle opened, and Panera moved to a larger space, in Glenmont;
 - Coray Kitchen opened, and Kelly’s Pharmacy made major renovations to an old bank building to open, in the Four Corners; and
 - Top Notch Athletics, a softball training facility just opened in Glenmont, Uncommon Grounds will soon be opening in the Delaware Plaza in Elsmere, the list goes on.
- We’re seeing businesses invest in Bethlehem because we’re a great place to do business, and our Town government and Industrial Development Agency are committed to supporting them and are proud to have them in our community.

SUSTAINABILITY: In 2022, the big economic development news in Bethlehem was the opening of Plug Power’s 350,000 square foot hydrogen fuel cell manufacturing facility in Slingerlands. This was notable not just because of the size of the business, but because Plug is a leader in the new green economy, and Bethlehem is committed to sustainability and green economic growth.

Climate change is a real and serious challenge even in a comfortable community like ours. **Sustainability** is therefore a core tenet of the Bethlehem Forward Comprehensive Plan Update, and a core operating tenet of our Town government. On the small scale, in 2023 we installed a solar-powered parking lot light at Town Hall and received delivery of our 7th electric vehicle.

On the large scale, we have continued to expand our model **Compost Facility**. In 2023, this facility redirected 2.2 million cubic feet of yard waste away from landfills and instead turned it into 670,000 cubic feet of exceptional compost and wood mulch. Beyond that, Bethlehem is the only Capital Region municipality to accept and compost food waste. Last year, we composted more than 13,000 cubic feet of food scraps, opened food scrap drop stations for residents, and began actively teaching other communities how they can also compost their food scraps and, in turn, reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

To get Bethlehem a bit of extra credit for our outstanding sustainability efforts and successes, I’ve convened a small team of dedicated and knowledgeable volunteers to navigate the exceptionally complicated state process of becoming a certified **Climate Smart Community** this year. We will undertake our sustainability initiatives regardless of the certification effort, but it’s always nice to have our Town get recognition and credit for the great work that our staff, residents, and businesses are doing.

HISTORIC PRESERVATION: The last initiative I'd like to highlight tonight is historic preservation. The history of our town is something that many talk about and that we all value, whether consciously or subconsciously, because it helps define who we are as a community. The challenge that I've seen, however, is that while many talk about the value of historic preservation, there are very few programs to help us actually achieve it.

With this in mind, about a year and a half ago I formed a small working group to research real steps that the Town could take to promote historic preservation. The team of four – Town Historian Bill Ketzer, former Town Historian Susan Leath, architect Danny Sanders, and archeologist Dan Mazeau – has not only identified options for us to consider, they have drafted a bylaw that is in the final stages of review by our Town Attorney. We are working to bring the bylaw – which focuses on incentives, not restrictions – to the Town Board this year so we can get beyond talking about historic preservation to actually offering ways to ensure that historic buildings and neighborhoods persist not just as part of our history, but also as part of our future.

CONCLUSION

2024 will be my 7th year as Town Supervisor, and it is such an honor to serve in this role for a fourth term. 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, residents, and my fellow Town Board members on so many important things that will benefit us for generations.

We are a wonderful community with good neighbors, valued businesses, and natural beauty. I encourage all of you, as regularly as possible, to find hope in building a better Bethlehem by getting out to gatherings like this for real interactions with real neighbors. And to be reminded, again and again, how truly fortunate we are to call Bethlehem home.

Thank you.