



# State of the Town Address for Bethlehem, NY

David VanLuven, Town Supervisor  
January 22, 2025

## WELCOME

Good evening and thank you for joining this State of the Town address. It's so nice to have so many neighbors, friends, and partners together to Celebrate Bethlehem!

- Welcome elected officials in attendance

## THANK YOUs

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 Towne 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, place art on the Rail Trail, 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 dedicated 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. I see many of you here tonight, and I am so grateful for your vision, leadership, and true commitment to the well-being of our community.



## MAJOR ISSUES

Tonight's address is going to be a bit different from past State of the Town addresses. As in the past, I am going to recognize the important work of our dedicated Town employees, but I also want to dig into four hard issues that our Town staff, Town Board, and I have been and are continuing to tackle: Safe Water, Safe Roads, Safe Neighborhoods, and Economic Development.

**SAFE WATER:** Everyone is talking about water. So, let's get right to it. Delivering 1.6 billion gallons of safe drinking water to nearly 12,000 customers through 227 miles of pipes is one of the most important services the Town of Bethlehem provides. We follow strict federal EPA and NYS Dept. of Health schedules for monitoring our water supply for more than 90 potential contaminants. This helps ensure that our water is, and continues to be, safe to drink.

Last fall, unusual warmth and extended drought created conditions that allowed an **algae bloom** in our Vly Creek Reservoir. Our New Salem Water Treatment Plant was able to easily clear the algae from the water it sent into town, but it was not designed to eliminate a harmless chemical released by the algae that creates an odor. The result was that our water remained perfectly safe to drink, as confirmed by both the New York State and Albany County Departments of Health, but it had a musty smell.

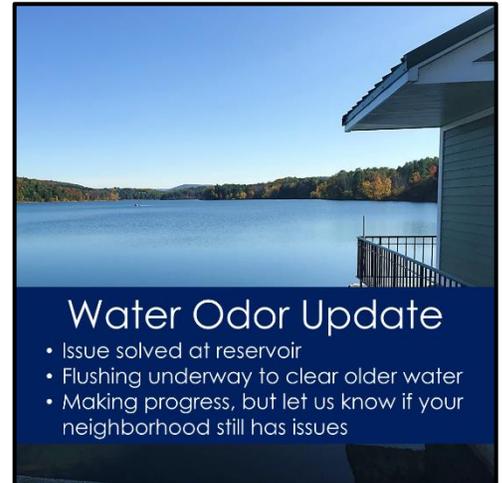
Bethlehem isn't the only municipality to have faced this challenge. Houston Texas, Raleigh North Carolina, Montgomery County Maryland, Birmingham Alabama, and more have all had algae blooms that left their water safe to drink but with a musty smell. Late season algae blooms, however, have in the past been an issue for southern communities, not northeastern municipalities like Bethlehem.

Climate change is changing this, as presented to the Town Board at a recent meeting by Dr. William Becker, a renowned water expert who has worked with municipalities across the U.S. and who has been working closely with our Town water team to address the water issue here. He explained that as our climate becomes more like southern states, we will begin to experience challenges that in past years we have been protected from.

In response to the unprecedented late-fall algae bloom, our dedicated water team worked closely with the Departments of Health and water experts to upgrade our treatment plant with a powder activated carbon filter. That was Step 1. Step 2 has been working relentlessly to flush the musty smelling water out of our 227-mile, highly interconnected water system. They have flushed from more than 850 hydrants over the last two months, but it is taking time because we are very, very good at smelling this harmless chemical. So sensitive, in fact, that 5 drops are enough to make an Olympic Pool smell like a lake. The result is that we don't just have to get most of the unwanted smelling water out of our water mains, we have to get it all out.

And our hard-working team has been on it, continues to be on it, and won't stop until the job is done. But that's not all, because they are also working closely with NYS Department of Health and international water experts to identify and implement necessary treatment measures at our water treatment plants to ensure this never, ever happens again.

But there's more to our safe water than climate change. In 2023, the federal EPA issued a mandate that all municipalities inventory their water service lines for **lead**. Service lines are the pipes that extend from the water main under the road into our homes and businesses. With about 12,000 service lines that need to be tested, it's a massive challenge. But we must do it, we are committed to doing it, and we are well ahead of other municipalities in getting this critical safety work done.



**HELP GET THE LEAD OUT**

Please help us meet a federal mandate to check every service line (the pipe that runs from the water main to your house) for lead.

It's easy! Get instructions at [www.TownofBethlehem.org/LeadCheck](http://www.TownofBethlehem.org/LeadCheck).

Thank you!

A diagram of a water service line. It shows a pipe entering from the right labeled "Incoming Water Service". The pipe goes left through a "Shut-Off Valve" (a red-handled valve) and then through a "Water Meter". The pipe continues left, labeled "Water Flow". A blue box labeled "SURVEY AREA" is positioned below the pipe between the meter and the valve.

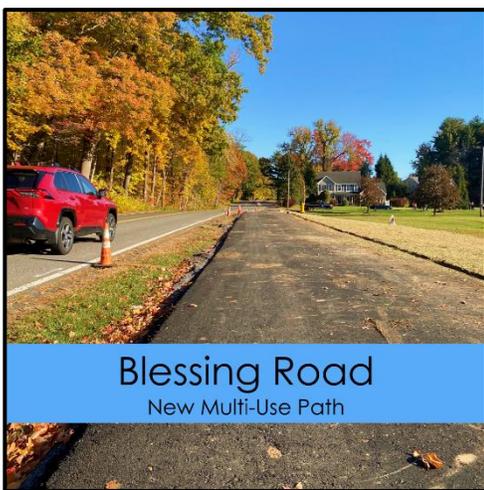
**SAFE ROADS:** Another major challenge in our community is traffic safety. I hear a lot of concerns from community members about many different things, but traffic safety is the one I hear the most. These concerns take many forms, but ultimately they all pretty much fall into people driving too quickly 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, we are continuing the **Bethlehem Safe Streets** traffic safety education campaign. The core goals of this campaign 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, especially when you're near a school.

Second, we are continuing to invest aggressively in **sidewalk improvements**. Our 47-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. We have been strategically investing in sidewalk improvements over the last seven years, and I am so appreciative of the Town Board and Highway Superintendent for supporting this vital work. We still have a lot of work to do, but with more than 26,000' of sidewalks restored and built in the last three years and a \$5 million state grant to do more over the next three years, we're on the right track for success.

That major state grant is more than \$5 million from the NYS Dept of Transportation that we landed in 2024 to restore the degraded sidewalks along state-owned roads. Planning and permitting will take place in 2025, and in the two following years we are on track to rebuild the sidewalks along state roads including New Scotland Road in Slingerlands, portions of Kenwood Ave and Delaware Ave in Delmar, Elsmere Ave in Elsmere and Delmar, and Bridge Street in South Bethlehem. State permitting requirements for sidewalk improvements along state roads are complex and exhaustive, and I am grateful that NYS DOT came through with \$5 million in funding that will allow these critical projects to move forward.



We are also working strategically on safety improvements along Kenwood Ave near the Bethlehem Central Middle School and St Thomas the Apostle School in Delmar, and along Feura Bush Road in Glenmont. And with a \$1 million grant from the state, we will be constructing a multi-use path along the Cherry Avenue Extension between Kenwood Ave and the Slingerlands commercial district. This project will create a safe travel corridor for walkers and cyclists between the rail trail and businesses

along New Scotland Ave, and in combination with the Blessing Road multi-use path, will better connect North Bethlehem with the rest of town.

Third, our Police Department is diligently monitoring our roads for drivers who are drunk, reckless, and driving too fast. To further their efforts to get drivers to drive more slowly, we



continued working with the Capital Region Transportation Council in 2024 to complete a technical and engineering analysis that the State of NY requires before speed limit changes can be made. Now that this is done, the goal of the Town Board and me is to change the **speed limit** on all of our residential streets from 30 to 25 mph. This may sound like a simple thing, but it's actually very difficult because the objective is to make people drive more slowly, not just to change the speed limit. Starting in 2025, we will therefore have to install hundreds of speed signs across town, conduct a comprehensive campaign to educate residents about the lower speed limit, and adapt our traffic enforcement to make sure every driver on every street knows that 25 miles per hour is the new rule of the road.

We're also going to see **safe streets construction** begin on Delaware Ave in Elsmere this spring. The road will still have four-lanes, but they'll be narrower to slow drivers and to create a bit more space between cars and pedestrians. The project will also improve sidewalks and curb cuts in partnership with local businesses to make it easier to walk between neighborhoods and businesses, and add a new crosswalk with rapid flashing crosswalk beacons near Salisbury Rd. We are structuring the daily construction schedule to minimize delays for drivers and ensure that local businesses are still easily accessible throughout the construction period. But we as residents must continue to patronize the wonderful businesses during construction so we can continue enjoying their services after the project is completed.



When you see these important projects underway, remember that the project costs are heavily supported by federal grants totaling \$6.3 million. I'm stressing this because times are tight, so our staff, the Town Board, and I have been and continue to work hard to bring in additional outside funding so we can deliver great services, invest in critical infrastructure, and protect everyone's pocketbooks.

**SAFE NEIGHBORHOODS & SCHOOLS:** As everyone knows, this fall our community was the victim of a series of calls threatening the safety of Bethlehem Central High School students. It was a terrible experience for these students, their families, school staff, and our community as a whole. But we came together and stood strong throughout it.



**Officer of the Year**  
**Officer Rico Fiore**

Our Bethlehem Police Department worked closely with the Bethlehem Central School district to make sure that the students and staff were safe. Behind the scenes, our Police Detectives also worked diligently to track down the individual responsible for these calls. They were joined in this effort by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and they successfully determined who and where the caller was. That much was in the news.

What didn't seem to get picked up, however, was that this individual had also been making threatening calls to communities in more than a dozen states and provinces across the US and Canada. But he wasn't caught until he threatened *our* community, because *our* detectives would not be deterred, following potential leads across state lines and ultimately across international boundaries to bring this individual to justice. Other Police Departments in other states and provinces gave up. Bethlehem's Police Department did not. Our officers work hard for us every day, responding to calls, supporting our residents, and tracking down criminals, no matter where they try to hide.

**ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT:** Now, let's take a moment to talk about the important economic activities within our community. There are people on social media who have declared that Bethlehem is in economic freefall. This looks great on a computer screen in the basement at 3 in the morning, but one needs only to walk through the vibrant commercial districts in Slingerlands, Delmar, Elsmere, and Glenmont, or drive past the many important industries in Selkirk and South Bethlehem, to know that this claim is nonsense.

In 2024, 21 new businesses opened in town. Investors are in the process of replacing the Dollar Tree in Glenmont with a Trader Joes. In Delaware Plaza in Elsmere, there's a new restaurant, a bustling indoor playground, and we'll soon have a new Uncommon Grounds. Food lovers from all over the Hudson Valley are coming to Delmar and our other hamlets for fine dining, great coffee, and great beer. Plug Power, a global leader in green hydrogen, has moved its headquarters into Bethlehem (and thank you, County Executive Dan McCoy, for making this possible!). If you buy pink fiberglass batt insulation in the Northeastern United States, it was manufactured at the Owens Corning Plant in Selkirk. These are not indicators of economic distress in Bethlehem, they are evidence of growth and success, because Bethlehem has been and continues to be one of the best places in the Capital Region to do business.



## STAFF

Over the last 7 years, I have steadily emphasized that the Town doesn't deliver services, hard-working 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 15 years, our town workforce has dropped from 241 in 2009 to 225 in 2025. 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 new challenges, inflation, or budgets.

Fortunately, Bethlehem has dedicated 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 Town employees, I want to take a moment to talk about property taxes and how little you pay for the vital 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 2025,

- 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.

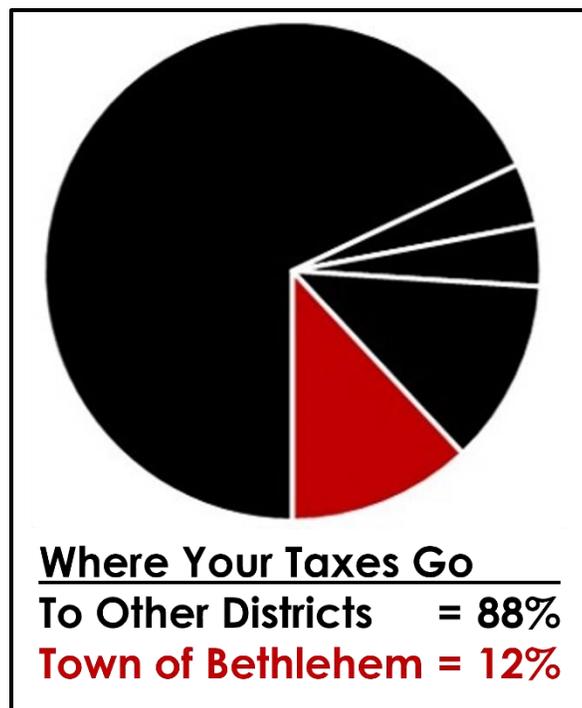
So for every property tax dollar you pay in 2025, the Town of Bethlehem will only see 12 cents.

The remaining 88 cents go elsewhere.

## 2024 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 2024:

- Our **Public Works** department
  - delivered 1.6 billion gallons of safe drinking water to almost 12,000 homes and businesses,
  - through 227 miles of pipes,
  - including 1,873 fire hydrants.
  - We also processed 1.6 billion gallons of sewage, and the effluent from the plant was cleaner than the Hudson River it flowed into.
- Our **Police department**
  - patrolled 287,000 miles (which is twice around the earth, and then to the moon – all in Bethlehem) and
  - answered 40,000 calls for service.
  - The incredible men and women of our Police Department, under the leadership of Chief Gina Cocchiara, protect and serve us daily with respect and a true dedication to our wellbeing.
- Our **Highway department**
  - built and restored 5,485’ of sidewalks, including a major portion of a new multi-use path on Blessing Road in North Bethlehem. Blessing Road is the only road connecting the North Bethlehem hamlet with the rest of town, and sees 5,000 to 6,000 cars per day. This multi-use path will dramatically improve the safety of residents walking and biking in the hamlet or traveling into Slingerlands.
  - We also paved 12 miles of roads to keep them free from potholes, and
  - plowed through several snowstorms.
  - Our Highway crews also collected more than 2.6 million cubic feet of yard waste last year, a massive challenge that they undertook strategically and effectively. A big thank you to Highway Superintendent Marc Dorsey and his team.
- In 2024, our **Recycling & Composting** department
  - turned all that yard waste into 802,000 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.

- And Dan Rain, the Director of our Recycling & Composting Department, is now also the Board President of the New York State Association for Reduction, Reuse, and Recycling. Congratulations, Dan!

- Our **Parks** department, under the leadership of Jason Gallo,
  - hosted 37,000 pool visitors, and
  - gave swim lessons to almost 500 kids.
  - Beyond that, we continued to invest strategically in our parks infrastructure. We rebuilt the basketball court at South Bethlehem Park, and thanks to a \$175,000 grant from now-retired Senator Neil Breslin, we built a gorgeous new pavilion there. We also built 10 new pickleball courts at Elm Avenue Park, an effort greatly advanced by a \$50,000 grant from Assembly member Scott Bendett and by our Highway Department whose participation in the project saved the Town about \$100,000. We also started restoration work on the Olympic Pool in the pool complex. When this is done later this spring, all of our town pools will be in the best shape they’ve been in since the pool complex was built in the mid 1970s.



- **The Delmar-Bethlehem Emergency Medical Service** is a nonprofit partner with the town that
  - responded to more than 4,000 calls,
  - transported more than 3,000 people to hospitals, and
  - did this with 65 volunteers who gave more than 16,000 hours of service.
  - One of the core tenets of Delmar-Bethlehem EMS is “kindness.” This is important, because not only are their volunteers handling calls with professionalism, they’re handling them with compassion and understanding.
- **Our Senior Services** department does everything.



- Our volunteers drove more than 100,000 miles while providing more than 21,000 rides to bring residents to doctors’ visits, hair appointments, grocery shopping, 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 provided more than 17,000 meals and other necessities to help families in need.
  - They also shared medical equipment not only to seniors, but to all community members. If you or a loved one needs crutches, a wheelchair, or other medical appliances, please contact our Senior Services department before you buy something you can borrow from us!

- Our excellent and respected **Justice Court** handled more than 5,500 traffic and criminal cases.
  - I'd like to take a moment to thank Judge Ryan Donovan for 18 years of service on the bench. Justice Donovan leaves behind a proud legacy in the Bethlehem Courtroom, one characterized by a deep understanding of the law and a strong dedication to the well-being of victims, defendants, and the community alike.
  - Recognizing that service, I would also like to welcome Judge Erin Lynch to our Town Court, as I know that she, along with Judge Andrew Kirby, will continue the Court's tradition of 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
- mediated more than 215 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 **Clerk's** office is always busy. Last year, the 3 staff in this office
  - issued 116 marriage licenses,
  - registered more than 1,500 dogs, and
  - spent 100s of hours processing FOIL requests (which is a critical part of open, transparent government). We received 292 FOIL requests in 2024, which is average of more than one every business day.



- Our **Assessor's Office** implemented almost 7,300 property tax exemptions to help lower tax bills.
- Finally, our **Town staff collectively** landed more than \$7.7 million in federal, state, and county funds in 2024 to support local projects. These critical funds will support the purchase of a new Senior Services minivan, extensive sidewalk improvements, almost \$1 million of critical police equipment, new tennis courts at Elm Ave Park, and more. In fiscally stressful times, I am so grateful to have our staff working so hard to bring in additional funding to move vital and needed capital projects forward.

## CONCLUSION

I was reminded a couple of weeks ago why I love our Town of Bethlehem so much. I was in the American Legion at the Court of Honor for two new Eagle Scouts. One had built new benches and a pergola for the Bethlehem Lutheran Church, the other a gorgeous information kiosk for the Native Plant Demonstration Garden here at Town Hall. A third new Eagle Scout was in the audience. She was the first female Eagle Scout in her troop, and last fall she finished picnic tables and benches for the Bethlehem Central High School.

These young adults had spent years working towards their goals of becoming Eagle Scouts – envisioning service projects, raising funds to pay for them, organizing peers to help build them, and navigating the politics of institutions and adult personalities to create tangible good for our community. Young adults like these don't just give me hope for our future, they give me confidence in it. Can we all give Gregory Courtney, Chris Cutsogeorge, and Lizzy Cable a round of applause?

Like these Eagle Scouts, our Town staff work hard to support our community every single day, delivering services that have real, beneficial impacts on our quality of life. While we are a town of many hamlets, we are fundamentally one community, and a strong one at that. It has been an honor to work for the last 7 years with business owners, residents, and my fellow Town Board members on so many important things that will benefit us for generations, and to work with so many committed Town employees.

As we move into 2025, I want to remind everyone that my door is always open to talk, whether about a major challenge the Town is navigating, an issue you're seeing, a concern you have, or an opportunity to make our town even better. And you don't have to come to me – I'll come to your door or meet you for coffee. We may be a large municipality, but we still operate with a respect not just for the interests of the many, but for the needs of each resident, business owner, and visitor alike. So in 2025, come talk to me, go beyond social media to talk to your neighbors, support our great businesses, and explore our beautiful town.

It is the job of government to face and take on hard challenges. It takes hard-working, dedicated people to meet those challenges. Let me say, without reservation, that Bethlehem, New York is well positioned to meet the moment, so that we can continue to be proud of this special place we call home.

Thank you.

