

WELCOME

Good evening friends, 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

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

It is always an honor to deliver the State of the Town address. It is gratifying 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 passion, their measured patience, and their unwavering dedication to supporting our residents and businesses.

STORM

Before I dive in, I want to take a moment to acknowledge the exceptional work of our Highway Department during the storm earlier this week. This was the largest snowfall that we've seen in years, and it was relentless. Fortunately, our Highway crews were also relentless, working from mid-day on Sunday straight through the end of Monday. One plow run through town is 360-miles, and during the storm they made 4 runs, which is the equivalent of plowing a road from Delmar to Miami. And their work continued strong well after the storm ended.

In addition to their routes, our plow drivers were on call to support emergency services. In the heart of the storm, plows led Delmar-Bethlehem EMS ambulances to several calls for help, and then cleared the way for them to get to the hospital.

Would everyone please join me in a round of applause for our intrepid Highway workers and Delmar-Bethlehem EMS volunteers?

HOPE

My State of the Town address tonight will be about action, service, hope, and community. But as much as I hate to include it, I have to acknowledge the federal context in which your town government's positive work is taking place.

Law Enforcement

Some of the most shocking images and actions that we're seeing nationally today involve masked ICE agents pepper spraying peaceful demonstrators, breaking into homes without proper warrants, separating young children from their families, and even taking lives.

I am one of our community's most relentless optimists, but I'm finding it hard to find hope in the face of this uncontrolled hate. But I am finding it. I find hope in the way that Minnesota residents are standing together against illegal and immoral actions. And I find hope here in Bethlehem with our Police Department because they show us, every day, what law enforcement and service are supposed to be.

The Bethlehem Police Department is a model of community policing, setting the standard that other communities only strive for.

- Our Police Officers proudly show their faces.
- Our Police Officers identify themselves.

– Our Police Officers follow the law.

And our Police Officers diligently protect all of our community members with restraint and professionalism, because everyone deserves the privilege of asking for help without fear.

In 2025, their patrols covered more than 286,000 miles – that’s twice around the earth and then to the moon. They responded to more than 40,000 calls for support. And they upheld the primary tenets of policing, which are to protect and serve their community.

It’s worth remembering that our officers are also members of our community. Their kids are in school beside ours, they coach local teams, their families work in local businesses, the list goes on. So if you have concerns about something, need help, or see someone in need of help, don’t ever hesitate to call the Bethlehem Police Department, because they are there for everyone.

Food Insecurity

Another challenge I’m seeing here in Bethlehem is food insecurity. While we are a relatively affluent community, we have always had families in need. Over the last year, we have seen this need for support grow, particularly in the last few months as access to federal programs like SNAP and Medicare have been restricted, leading to ever tighter budgets slamming into ever rising food prices.

Our Senior Services Department has run the Town Hall Food Pantry with Bethlehem Senior Projects for more than 20 years. It’s a vital service to our community, and it is heavily used. In 2024, the Food Pantry provided 17,000 meals. In 2025, that number grew to more than 27,000 meals. And this doesn’t include all the food and supplies that are distributed to community members through the Bethlehem Reformed Church pantry in Selkirk and Patty’s Place in South Bethlehem.

Each day when I come to work, I see this increased demand for food and basic supplies in the small food pantry beside the Town Hall playground that was installed by Girl Scout Troop 1737. This little outdoor pantry is stocked by generous residents and is always open. Sadly, the daily flow of food out of the pantry jumped dramatically starting last November.

Happily, the flow of food *into* the little and main food pantries surged as well. Starting in November, so much food and supplies have been donated that we’ve had to partner with the First United Methodist Church to store all the overflow. But the need isn’t abating, so if you can, please continue donating to local food pantries. It really does help.

Affordability

Affordability challenges affect all households in Bethlehem. Food prices remain high. Consumer goods prices remain high. Housing costs remain high. Medical costs are astronomical.

We take affordability very seriously here in Town Hall. Our departments operate on razor thin budgets, and any fat in our Town budget was cut out many years ago. Because of this, our town has consistently remained within the state-mandated property tax cap while still finding ways to deliver exceptional services and strategically invest in important infrastructure. I’ll review and highlight some of these successes in a few minutes, but I first want to remind everyone where your property taxes go.

PROPERTY TAXES

As you know, we pay our property taxes in two installments: one bill in January, the second in September. Most of these property tax dollars never come to the Town. Instead, our property taxes are distributed between 5 completely independent taxation districts.

In 2026,

- 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 2026, the Town of Bethlehem will only see 12 cents. The remaining 88 cents go elsewhere.

STAFF

The vast majority of our Town budget pays for staff, because as I have repeatedly said, the Town doesn't deliver services, hard-working people do. People plow our roads. People patrol our neighborhoods and protect our wellbeing. People fix broken water mains and run the plant that cleans 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 17 years, our town workforce has dropped from 241 in 2009 to 228 in 2026. That's 13 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.

ACTION

Now, 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.

To give you a sense of this, I'm going to present a quick tour of the incredible work your Town is doing on 6 major issues: Water Quality, Traffic Safety, Parks Infrastructure, Growth, Economic Development, and Sustainability.

MAJOR ISSUES AND INITIATIVES

Water Quality

As we all recall, unusual warmth and extended drought in the fall of 2024 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 created an odor. The result was that our water remained perfectly safe to drink, as confirmed repeatedly by both the New York State and Albany County Departments of Health, but it had a musty smell, and it took us several months to fully flush it out of our 227-mile, highly interconnected water system.

Algae blooms are not uncommon in communities south of New York, and these municipalities have systems in place to manage them. Now that climate change is bringing the warm conditions that favor algae blooms north into our region, we are doing the same.

In the reservoir, our innovative Public Works Department has instituted new algae control protocols to keep blooms from happening. In the water treatment plant, they have added a new filter system that specifically targets taste and odor issues should they come in from the reservoir. In the distribution system, they have made modifications that will allow them to take the reservoir fully offline if a bloom somehow happens again. The success of these efforts was shown by us not having a repeat of the musty water problem.

Delivering 1.6 billion gallons of safe drinking water to nearly 12,000 customers is one of the most important services the Town of Bethlehem provides. But our Public Works Department's responsibilities go beyond getting safe water to our homes: they also maintain 1,877 fire hydrants across town, and in 2025 they cleaned 1.5 billion gallons of sewage so effectively that the outflow from our wastewater treatment plant continued to be cleaner than the Hudson River it flowed into.

Traffic Safety

Shifting gears, the most common concerns I heard in 2025 centered on traffic safety. These concerns took many forms, but they all pretty much fell into two categories: people driving too quickly and people not respecting the safety of pedestrians, cyclists, or even other motorists.

Our multi-faceted work to address these concerns continued strong in 2025, and will continue strong again in 2026. One principal front has been **sidewalk improvements**. In 2025, our Highway Department restored another 3,625 feet of sidewalks, bringing the total length of sidewalks restored or built to more than 8 miles over the last 8 years. Our 47-mile sidewalk network was neglected for decades, but our Highway Superintendent, the Town Board, and I remain fully committed to strategically investing in improvements to this vital network. We still have a lot of work to do, but we are on the right track for success.

Many of the sidewalks most in need of restoration run beside **state roads**. Thanks to a \$5 million dollar grant that we landed from the NYS Dept of Transportation in 2024, we are on track to restore them. Engineering and design work on this critical project began in 2025 and will continue through 2026, with construction slated to begin in 2027. When completed, we will have fixed almost 6 more miles of heavily used sidewalks. Thank you, DOT for supporting pedestrians in Bethlehem!

In addition to this planned restoration work, in 2025 we completed the mile-long **Cherry Ave Multi-Use Path** which connects Kenwood Ave and the Rail Trail with the growing Slingerlands commercial district. This important project was sparked by an interested resident years ago, and was made possible by a \$1,832,000 grant from the NYS Department of Transportation. Again, thank you, DOT, for supporting pedestrians and cyclists in Bethlehem!

On a related front, design work and easements for the **Delaware Avenue Complete Streets** project in Elsmere wrapped up in 2025, so we are on track for construction to move forward this year. Driven by a \$5,307,000 grant from DOT, 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 to make it easier to walk between neighborhoods and businesses, and add a much-needed crosswalk with rapid flashing beacons near Salisbury Road. 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 these great businesses during construction so we can continue enjoying their services after the project is completed.

Given the importance of slowing down traffic, in 2026 I will be working with the Town Board to enact the legislation necessary to lower the **speed limits on our neighborhood streets to 25mph**. Over the last two years, our Planning Department and Engineering Division have undertaken the detailed analyses that the State requires municipalities to conduct before lowering speed limits. With these done, we are now poised to move forward with the change.

While lowering the speed limit may sound like a simple thing, it's actually very difficult because the objective is to have people drive more slowly, not just to change the speed limit. So this year we will begin installing hundreds of new speed limit signs in neighborhoods, launch an education campaign, 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.

This on-the-ground work is critical, but **traffic safety is ultimately up to drivers**, because the problem is us. According to our Police Department, the people driving too quickly near elementary schools and the middle school are... parents picking up and dropping off their kids. People driving too fast in neighborhoods are... people who live in those neighborhoods. It's easy to complain about how other people are driving. It's harder to practice what we demand. But we all need to take a breath, slow down, and drive the way we want everyone else to drive. Because ultimately it's up to us, all of us, to make our streets even safer.

Park Investments

Bethlehem has the best parks network and best parks programs in the Capital Region. In 2025, our Parks & Recreation Department welcomed 39,000 visitors to the pool complex, taught 500 kids how to swim, and hosted more than 9,500 guests at 25 special events.

Infrastructure is an important component of our parks, and we have been strategically investing in improving it.

- In 2025, we fully restored the **Olympic Pool**, which means the three pools at Elm Avenue Park are now in the best shape they've been in since they were first built in the 1970s.
- We restored the **tennis courts** at Elm Avenue Park, thanks to almost \$100,000 in funding from the US Tennis Association and a generous grant from Assembly member Scott Bendett. Thank you, Assembly member Bendett!
- We are currently working with Senator Pat Fahy this year to put in an **ADA accessible playground** in the North Bethlehem Park, because we want our parks to be welcoming to everyone.
- And last year we built three new bridges in the **Normans Kill Ravines** to make this gorgeous nature park easier to explore. The bridges were possible because of a generous grant from Senator Pat Fahy. Thank you, Senator Fahy!
- But that's not all for Normans Kill Ravines. We are in the final stages of a purchase agreement with the owners of 133 acres adjacent to the park, which would enlarge the park to just about 300 acres, which is almost double the size of Elm Avenue Park. If we are able to close on this project, and we're not quite there yet, it will be possible thanks to generous support from the Mohawk Hudson Land Conservancy and Albany County. Thank you, County Executive Dan McCoy and County Legislature Chair Joanne Cunningham, for your steadfast support of green spaces and Bethlehem!

Growth

Parks are one of the many reasons that people want to live and work in Bethlehem. And because people want to live and work here, Bethlehem is growing and will continue to grow.

In 2022, the Town Board adopted the Bethlehem Forward Comprehensive Plan Update which laid out our community's priorities for guiding how we grow over the next decade and beyond. For the last two and a half years, our Planning Board has been working with Town staff, consultants, and community members to translate these priorities into clear **zoning code changes** to support implementation. It has been a long and thorough process, and in the coming weeks the Planning Board will turn the update over to the Town Board to finalize it.

The process to date has involved extensive public participation, and I very much hope that residents will continue to engage and work with the Town Board as we finalize the code update. We want and welcome this input because growth in a community is hard. But it doesn't have to be bad. The Zoning Code Update will help guide future changes in a way that maintains or even enhances the things that make Bethlehem such a desirable place to live and work. And that's something we all want.

Economic Development

Growth that we typically do like is economic, and we continue to see Bethlehem's business community succeeding. In 2025, 22 new businesses opened in town, including Trader Joes in Glenmont, Broad Street Bagels in Slingerlands, and Aloe Vera Naturals in Delmar. Our Senior Economic Developer notes that Bethlehem has an extremely low vacancy rate because commercial spaces are full.

The Town continues to support both new businesses looking to open here and existing businesses who are already part of our community. One key initiative is our microenterprise grant program, which in 2025 received another \$200,000 from the State. Our Microenterprise Grant Committee is currently reviewing applications from small businesses, and will begin disbursing the funds this year to support job creation, business development, and long-term sustainability.

These successes are clear evidence that Bethlehem has been and continues to be one of the best places in the Capital Region to do business.

Sustainability

My final major topic area is sustainability, and there are a suite of successes that I want to touch on briefly before wrapping up.

- In 2025, the NYS Dept of Environmental Conservation recognized Bethlehem as a **Silver Certified Climate Smart Community**. This is their highest standard for sustainability, and Bethlehem is just the 21st out of 1,600 municipalities statewide to earn this elite status over the last decade.
- One of the highlights in our sustainability work has been and will continue to be our **Recycling & Composting Department**. Our Compost Facility is a statewide model, and in 2025 they produced more than 20 MILLION pounds of compost and wood mulch, and diverted more than 850,000 pounds of food scraps out of the waste stream for composting.
- Another highlight is our work at the **Historic Heath Farm**. Last year, we stabilized the historic barn to correct more than a decade of neglect. We are now working with partner organizations like the American Farmland Trust to determine best future uses and funding sources for the barn, in addition to keeping the fields in active agriculture.
- Finally, I believe that sustainability is about more than land, air, and water. It is also about our built environment. And later tonight, I am excited to have Bill Ketzer, our Town Historian, introduce a proposed new **Historic Preservation Law** that, if approved by the Town Board, will create new incentives for protecting our community's historic structures.

It's an important law that has been years in the making, and I am proud to have it moving now from concept to reality.

2025 IN REVIEW

Before I wrap up, I want to highlight the work of a few more departments and partners whose service, day in and day out, touches and improves our lives. In 2025:

- **The Delmar-Bethlehem Emergency Medical Service**, a nonprofit partner with the town,
 - responded to more than 4,900 calls,
 - transported more than 3,000 people to hospitals, and
 - did so with volunteers who gave more than 15,000 hours of service.
- Our **Senior Services** Department is the envy of the Capital Region.
 - Their volunteers drove more than 106,000 miles while providing more than 19,000 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.
- Our excellent and respected **Justice Court** handled more than 5,500 traffic and criminal cases.
 - They handled these cases with a deep understanding of the law and a strong dedication to the well-being of victims, defendants, and the community alike.
- Our **Building Division**
 - conducted more than 3,100 inspections to ensure buildings were safe;
 - processed more than 1,100 building permits for everything from swimming pools to multi-family apartment buildings; and
 - mediated more than 230 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 2 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 265 FOIL requests in 2025, which is average of more than one every business day.
- Our **Assessor's Office** implemented 7,000 property tax exemptions to help lower property tax bills.
- And collectively, our Town employees landed \$1,828,034 in **outside funding** to support our critical work and strategic infrastructure investment. Over the last four years, Town employees have brought in more than \$14 million. In these fiscally stressful times, I am so grateful to have our staff working so hard to find additional funding to move vital and needed capital projects forward.

CONCLUSION

I began tonight's address with a recognition that we need to find reasons for hope as we navigate a country dealing with daily chaos. I believe that we can find that hope in the actions, services, and community that we have here in Bethlehem.

We must stand strong, and we must stand together, when faced with illegal and immoral actions. But we must also support and strengthen the things that are going right in our community locally. Outrage is a powerful force, and it's valid and it's needed. But it is strongest when it is founded on good – good services, good schools, good neighborhoods, good government, and good people.

Too often, we take these good things for granted and focus on the things we don't like. It's human nature and it's normal. But it's not productive and it can lead to the mistaken view that everything and everyone are terrible. We see this in road rage and social media fury every day.

Where we don't see it is where we interact in person. In restaurants and shops, parks and performances, and even in Town Hall, we see every day that people are kind, people care, and people mostly want the same things.

So, as we stand together against forces that seek to divide us, remember where you're standing and who is standing beside you. Say hello in a coffee shop. Go to a concert at the library. Check on a neighbor during a snowstorm. Shovel out a fire hydrant. Take note of things around you that are good, and join me in being grateful that we get to live together in this wonderful community of Bethlehem.

Thank you.