



**CITY OF ITHACA**  
**108 East Green Street Ithaca, New York 14850-5690**

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MAYOR'S OFFICE

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State of the City

The City of Ithaca municipal code dictates that the Mayor shall, at the beginning of each year, address Common Council with "respect to the needs and resources of the city, including such programs and proposals for the good of the city as he/she may wish to recommend."

The state of the City is strong.

2014 saw its fair share of challenges. At this time one year ago we were battling ice jams with sandbags and backhoes. This summer saw difficult construction projects. A tragic accident in the heart of our City. An IPD pursuit that ended with inflamed tensions.

And still, despite these challenges, we've made progress. <sup>1</sup>

Our economy is growing. Our streets are safe. We've rescued ourselves from the brink of a fiscal disaster. We've made necessary investments in our infrastructure.

We still have work to do. <sup>2</sup>

We must continue to grow our economy - and make sure our economy works for everyone. We must adopt a novel approach to an ongoing and serious drug abuse problem. We must improve a fraught relationship between the police and the community they serve. And we must continue to invest in our infrastructure.

## **What's Working**

### **Economy is Moving.**

Sale of unused City owned land generated over \$300,000 in revenue and put unused and valuable real estate back on the tax rolls and into productive use.

We've ushered in important private investments in Coltivare, Cayuga Green II, Stone Quarry Apartments, Marriott Hotel, Rothschild Building renovations and the Lehigh Valley House Condominiums - all receiving building permits and are under construction.

Adoption of Collegetown area zoning has sparked a renaissance in that neighborhood. A half dozen projects have been proposed for construction in 2015. Those projects will soak up student demand for housing, greatly increase property tax revenue by investing on the most valuable land in the city, and - thanks to the adoption of form districts - improve the aesthetics of our community by replacing dilapidated housing stock with attractive and appropriate construction.

What's the result: The Ithaca Business Index is a metric maintained by Ithaca College that measure the overall state of our economy. It factors in the number of job openings, new building starts, retail sales and, most importantly the unemployment rate.

We ended 2014 with the single highest Business Index score on record. <sup>3</sup>

And at the end of 2014 the Ithaca metro area had 70,700 jobs - the highest number ever recorded.

### **Rescued ourselves from brink of fiscal emergency**

Three years ago we were on the verge of a catastrophe. Our savings had been drawn down each year, our taxes were rising well above any income gains, and our budget had a yawning \$3 million budget deficit.

We've made hard choices. At times unpopular choices. We streamlined, cut costs, encouraged growth in the private sector, and pursued outside sources of funding aggressively.

The result: we are on a firmer fiscal footing. In 2015 we will be able to invest directly in more street

paving and a 10% increase in the staffing of our police department - and still the tax rate will come down.

### **Crime Rate Remains Steady**

Our crime rate remains steady, and lower than our neighboring cities in Upstate New York. <sup>4</sup>

### **We've begun long overdue and major investments in our physical infrastructure**

We've begun long overdue and major investments in our physical infrastructure - rebuilding the water treatment plant, rebuilding the Commons, Old Elmira Road, bridges and streets all over the City - in many cases bringing in millions in outside sources of funding to complete the work.

## **What We Must Do**

These successes do not obscure our failures. We know that we have work to do. We face challenges and we must learn from our failures and adapt - if we're going to continue to thrive.

We must continue to grow our economy - and make sure the economy works for everyone. We must adopt a novel approach to an ongoing and serious drug abuse problem. We must improve a fraught relationship between the police and the community they serve. And we must continue to invest in our infrastructure.

### **Economic Opportunity**

Too many Ithacans are having a hard time making ends meet - and the growth we've experienced has left too many behind.

Past policies have not ensured equal opportunities for growth. <sup>5</sup>

A report by the US Conference of Mayor's points out that, "if average income rises at a faster pace than median income, it usually indicates that more and more income is being concentrated among the richer households. "

Economic wealth distribution since 2007 in the Ithaca area has been uneven with a shift in wealth towards upper-income households. From 2005 to 2012 the mean household income for the Ithaca area (Tompkins County) increased by 37% while the median household income only increased by 15%.

Ithaca ranks 2nd out of all 363 metropolitan areas in this ratio change, meaning income wealth is being shifted to upper income households at a faster rate in Ithaca than almost anywhere else in the nation. Lower and middle income households are failing to keep up with overall income growth.

So we must continue to create ladders of opportunity - and make sure everyone has a rung on which to climb.

How do we do that?

1. Continuing to encourage the growth of good paying jobs - and provide skills so that Ithacans are prepared to step into those jobs.
2. Continue to encourage housing growth - but make sure new growth fits with our neighborhoods, is aesthetically appropriate, and provides housing opportunities for all income levels.

*We will continue to support a budding entrepreneurship ecosystem.*

A successful entrepreneurship ecosystem supports local business at every level with intellectual, physical and financial resources.

The Ithaca Generator gives grassroots opportunities to budding inventors to make their idea a reality.

Rev Ithaca provides the space and mentorship to turn an idea and a product into a successful and thriving small business.

Grants, loans and abatements through the IURA and Tompkins County IDA provide the boost every business needs at its inception.

*The city's CIITAP abatement program*

Our CIITAP abatement program has successfully incentivized the kind of development we need - but it has caused concern that not enough community benefits are being attained. It's time to explore reforming the program and adopting an abatement policy that incentivizes growth, benefits all segments of our community, and is consistent with every community in the county.

To that end I will be asking the Tompkins County IDA to work with the City and our partner municipalities to devise a policy that applies to everyone.

*Continue to support Coltivare and the Hospitality Employment Training Program*

We must continue to support Coltivare and the Hospitality Employment Training Program. Our service sector provides secure employment and an entry into good, middle class jobs.

Coltivare, the new venture from Tompkins Cortland Community College is a farm to table bistro that functions as a real life learning laboratory for students in agriculture, the culinary arts, marketing and management. This affordable and accessible education will provide a boost into good paying and secure careers.

Housed at GIAC the Hospitality Employment Training Program is in its second year. It provides residents 18-30 years old who are currently underemployed or unemployed a path to a fulfilling career with a hotel, restaurant or spa. The program includes free training and a paid internship in the area of front office, food and beverage, clerical, maintenance, housekeeping, and management.

### *Lowering the Cost of Living*

Gainful employment is only one indicator of economic well-being. The cost of living is the other - and in Ithaca the cost of living is too high because the rents are too high and the taxes are too high.

We must do everything within our power to make renting and owning a home in Ithaca more affordable.

Rents are too high because supply is too limited. A vacancy rate of below 1 percent means that competition for space is heated - and those with the highest incomes are winning the competition.

Bringing down costs means increasing the supply of housing at every income level. Apartments, condos, and homes are needed at both market and subsidized rates.

The changes to zoning in downtown and Collegetown have sparked growth already, and when those homes open their doors we will see a stabilizing of rents.

Affordable housing projects at Breckinridge, Stone Quarry, and Hancock will also increase opportunities for the working class to live in the heart of the city.

What we must do now is ensure that the new growth does not disrupt what is valuable about our neighborhoods.

In 2015 we have two opportunities to accomplish this.

First, finally adopt a comprehensive plan that will inform the future of growth and preservation in our City. Second, adopt Collegetown Form Standards that will ensure that new growth is aesthetically appropriate.

### **Reforming our Approach to Drugs**

The forty year old war on drugs has been costly and ineffective. A national strategy that's put millions of people - disproportionately men of color - in prison has done nothing to reduce usage.

Across the country and here in Ithaca the effect of that failure is felt acutely. Abuse of drugs has led to overdoses, property crimes, loss of productivity, and the tearing apart of families.

It's time for a new approach to drug policy - an approach that's based in reason, logic, and effective results. It's time for an approach that treats the problem of drugs as a problem of public health.

To that end I've been working behind the scenes with the Drug Policy Alliance, a national non-profit specializing in policy reform and Bill Rusen the Executive Director of Cayuga Addiction Recovery Services for the last seven months.

I've asked Mr. Rusen to chair a large committee of community stakeholders across all sectors. Law enforcement, healthcare, education, social services, non-profits and the private sector. That committee has worked earnestly and without publicity for months.

Together they've created the groundwork for an approach that will break drug policy into four pillar areas: law enforcement, treatment, prevention and harm reduction.

In the coming months they'll be asking for more community involvement. Roundtables, surveys and community meetings will elicit input from the people most impacted by the drug trade, drug abuse, and the war on drugs.

This spring they will deliver to us a comprehensive set of policy recommendations that, if adopted, will reduce the impact of drug abuse on our community.

## Police and Community

Ithaca remains one of the safest cities in the country and the excellence and professionalism of Ithaca Police Department is a large reason for that security.

But relations between the department and some segments of the community are strained.

On August 10th of this year an Ithaca Police officer drew his weapon following a chase with several young black teens. The incident has drawn a great deal of community concern.

This concern is warranted - particularly in a larger context that includes Michael Brown's death in Ferguson, Missouri, Eric Gardner's death in New York City, the unrest around the country following grand jury decisions not to prosecute officers, officers involved in those shootings and a long history of violence and mistrust between the police and the black community.

After meeting repeatedly with parents, teens, religious leaders, members of the Common Council, community leaders, peers in other communities, reviewing the latest literature and working closely with Chief John Barber, I developed an eight point plan for excellence in policing.<sup>6</sup>

Those points include:

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- 1 - Cameras on officers and in cars
- 2 - City Residency Requirement
- 3 - Community Action Team
- 4 - Downtown Outreach Social Worker
- 5 - Opening a district office on the west end
- 6 - Full review of all policies and procedures
- 7 - Ten percent increase in police staffing
- 8 - Improved community outreach programming

Implementation of these points are all proceeding, and will undoubtedly establish trust, increase accountability, and improve outcomes. But no one single plan can repair a problem so complex and longstanding. We must all; civic leaders, City staff, community members, and police officers, commit ourselves every day to improving this important relationship.

## Highest Quality Infrastructure and Service Delivery

We must do all of these things - but never lose sight of what our core purpose as a City government. We must deliver the highest quality infrastructure and service delivery. Clean water, safe neighborhoods, smooth roads, fast response times.

If we provide these things than Ithacans can build lives of purpose and satisfaction for themselves and their families.

Without them, we don't have a City worth living in.

High quality infrastructure requires investment. It requires novel thinking. And it requires construction dust.

We'll make that investment this year by putting hundreds of thousands of dollars into street paving. 2015 will be the year of asphalt. Our streets will get repair that is long overdue - and we must use every communication channel available to us to get the word out about disruption.

We'll also be finishing the Commons in 2015. Delayed in 2014 because of an unbelievably complex set of underground utilities, a lack of cooperation from a utility service provider, and the tragic accident at Simeon's - we have made completing the work and helping businesses through the construction a priority.

Once finished the Commons will be the jewel of upstate New York. A beautiful place to live and work, and a destination for tourists and their dollars.

We've used novel thinking in creating our sidewalk and stormwater utility districts. Funded not by taxes - but by fees - these districts will allow us to make larger investments in infrastructure repair while more fairly apportioning the costs of these upgrades to large commercial properties and non-profits.

This year will also see the completion of Old Elmira Road, the Waterfront Trail, pedestrian enhancements at crucial intersections all over the City, and the continuation of the largest infrastructure project in the City of Ithaca's history - the rebuild of the water treatment plant. It is an appropriately ambitious agenda, and we will accomplish it all with the stewardship of Council, the expertise of the Board of Public Works, and the excellent leadership of Superintendent Mike Thorne and his team in the Department of Public Works.

## Conclusion

The State of the City is strong - but as always our success is fragile.

We've seen how it can be interrupted by acts of nature, or acts of violence.

The stability of a neighborhood threatened by an ungodly cold and a rush of water.

An uneasy calm erupts after a late night stop.

Our sense of security shattered when a hole is ripped in the heart of the City in one terrible instant.

But as Dostoyevsky knew,

'the darker the night,  
the brighter the stars  
the deeper the grief,  
the closer is God!'

Like the stars shining brightly against the darkness, our strength is revealed by our ability to weather hardship.

Our strength is revealed by Alderperson Mohlenhoff, over 100 volunteers and city staff working around the clock filling and delivering sandbags to protect our neighbors' homes from flooding.

Our strength is revealed by a community and a police department that does not turn our backs on each other, does not draw lines in the sand and does not retreat from dialogue in difficult times - but continues to engage and talk no matter how fraught the conversation.

Our strength is revealed by a community-wide effort to lift the family of the late Amanda Bush, taken from us too soon. Their philanthropy, their love, and their support.

Our strength is undeniable - and if we invest, if we grow in a way that benefits everyone, if we lead the way with new approaches to old problems, if we make the hard choices and if we bring Ithacans together - the state of the City of Ithaca will continue to be strong.

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- [1 Accomplishments of 2014](#)
  - [2 Goals for 2015](#)
  - [3 Ithaca Journal Article from 12/8/14](#)
  - [4 Ithaca Voice Article on Crime](#)
  - [5 Conference of Mayors Report](#)
  - [6 8 Point Plan](#)