

2014 STATE OF THE CITY ADDRESS



MAYOR STEPHANIE A. MINER

Good evening. Thank you all for joining me for the 2014 State of the City Address.

My thanks to Father Kevin Maloney for that beautiful invocation, and our new Common Councilor for the 2nd District, Chad Ryan, for his introduction.

I want to thank our volunteers from All Saints School for leading us in the Pledge of Allegiance. Didn't they do a great job?

I also want to thank Gary Thurston, Jeremy Thurston, Gus Hernandez, Kevin Valente and the entire team from Hayner Hoyt and St. Patrick's Lofts. Your work here at St. Pat's is truly impressive.

And thank you Deputy Commissioner Ben Walsh for your words about St. Pat's School and this very exciting project.

I want to acknowledge members of the Syracuse Common Council: Council President Van Robinson, Majority Leader Helen Hudson, Majority Whip Jake Barrett, President Pro-Tem Jean Kessner, and Councilors Pam Hunter, Bob Dougherty, Khalid Bey, Kathleen Joy, and Nader Maroun. Also seated with the Council, is City Clerk John Copanas.

I also want to thank City Auditor Marty Masterpole for joining us tonight.

Welcome to Syracuse Schools Superintendent Sharon Contreras. Thank you for being here Superintendent.

I want to welcome our Commissioners of Education as well. Thank you for being here this evening.

I welcome representatives of our state delegation as well – Senator John DeFrancisco, Senator Dave Valesky, Assemblyman Bill Magnarelli, and Assemblyman Sam Roberts.

Welcome to representatives from the offices of Governor Andrew Cuomo, Attorney General Eric Schneiderman, and Comptroller Tom DiNapoli.

We are also joined by representatives from our US Senators, and members of the Onondaga County Legislature. Thank you for being here.

County Executive Joanie Mahoney and members of her staff are here as well. Thank you for being here tonight.

And I also want to recognize our US Representative Dan Maffei. Thank you for joining us Congressman.

One of the best parts of being Mayor is visiting classrooms. Children have no pretense and they are always unpredictable. Often it's uniquely-phrased questions – like the Second-Grader at Roberts who stood up proudly and said, “First, you're very pretty. Second, what do you do all day?” Or, the First-Grader at Ed Smith who told me that we had a lot in common and when I gently said, “really?” he answered that his mother was a nurse like mine, his father was in the Army like mine and he had a Jack in his family too. When I looked at the teacher with what must have been a completely quizzical look she told me that Henry had help from his parents preparing for my visit.

But, among all of the conversations with hundreds of students there is one I think of often. It was still early in my term and I went to visit a kindergarten class at Blodgett. As I was taking questions from the class, a boy raised his hand and looked at me very seriously and asked, “Can boys be mayors too?” After I stammered a bit, I told him, “Yes, boys can be mayors too. In fact, boys can do anything girls can . . . for the most part.” Actually, I didn’t say that last part. Of course, his question is funny to us, given our experiences and knowledge of history, but I think it highlights an important object lesson for all of us. The kindergartener saw me, and the way I looked, as what a mayor is and always was. But, when he asked me if boys can be mayors too, he did something that we too often have stopped doing: he dreamed of a future that looked different; albeit one that included him.

As adults, we know the world as we see it and are often unable to see it any other way. We forget that not only is change possible, but, in fact, change is the only constant of life. All you need to do is look around and you can see we are living through tremendous change in the world and in our city. From the advancement of smart phone technology and the proliferation of social media, to the very building we sit in tonight. Years ago, few would have imagined St. Patrick’s School as anything other than a school, let alone that it would be transformed into these beautiful apartments. But many things change in time, and the seemingly immovable place this school has held in the minds of so many, has evolved to become what we see here this evening.

My administration has embraced change and advanced innovation as a core principle of our governing philosophy. We do not pursue change merely for the sake of change, but rather we strive to make the smart and necessary choices to move our entire community forward. We have gladly tangled with vested interests obstructing change and successfully overcome those

obstacles, which has made it possible for us to implement important new initiatives like the Regional Airport Authority and the Greater Syracuse Land Bank. We have forged a new sales tax agreement and consolidated services with the County. We have completed the first phases of both the Onondaga Creekwalk and the Joint Schools Construction project. We have guided and pushed unprecedented levels of redevelopment in our city. And we have made the tough choices required to survive an ever-raging fiscal storm.

These efforts are advancing Syracuse as a leading 21st Century city, and that has been shown in recognition received in recent years from IBM Smarter Cities, the Brookings Institution, Bloomberg Philanthropies and many others. To succeed, we have been open to real and meaningful change, and cut through historic and political impediments to boldly seize the initiative and plan for the future.

While we have had remarkable success, we must now build on that success. In order to do so we must face our greatest challenge and threat yet: our own lack of imagination. Not our inability to imagine, but our refusal to embrace the lesson of that young Blodgett student: to imagine a future that is different from the present, and yes, includes all of us.

I believe that all of us here, regardless of our differences, share a common goal for Syracuse. We all want a city with vibrant and dynamic neighborhoods; a strong public education system that prepares our children for the future; a place where people feel safe, regardless of what neighborhood they live in; and a robust economy that offers opportunity to all. Achieving this goal requires us to challenge the policies and practices of the past. Most importantly, it

requires that we embrace change, and imagine a community that is different from today, includes all of us and fulfills our dreams.

Tonight, I am going to talk to you about our new and continued plans to seize the opportunity the future holds for Syracuse.

Reaching for new possibilities in the future is only feasible when we make responsible decisions today. I have spoken often of the dire financial challenges our city, and indeed all cities face. Dwindling revenues stemming from long-term trends of declining tax base, and increased costs driven by skyrocketing pension and health care bills are creating financial stress unlike any we have faced in recent history.

It is important, however, that we remember how far we have come. When I took office in 2010 the City general fund was experiencing annual budget deficits. In the fiscal years ending in 2009 and 2010 we faced a combined \$13.8 million deficit, and we were projected to use \$25 million in fund balance. Instead our prudent financial management allowed us to use only \$9 million in fund balance. And since 2010 we have also reversed our general fund deficit trend, and achieved an \$8.4 million budget surplus in the fiscal year ending in 2012.

This success is a product of sound financial management and the will to make smart, tough choices. These choices can be painful, and are frequently unpopular. But the responsibility we have as public officials is to do what is in the best interests of the city, both now and in the long-term, especially when it is most difficult – politically or otherwise. The vote of confidence the community has given my administration to continue making the hard decisions is a testament to the toughness and resolve of our city.

My advocacy on issues effecting cities across our state has sometimes drawn criticism. When I declined to participate in New York State's pension smoothing program it was a bit controversial, and certainly not politically expedient. But putting pension obligations on a credit card and stacking that debt into future years would not have been the financially responsible thing to do. This year, and for the next several ahead of us, we will be taking hard medicine. But in time this decision will translate to lower annual pension bills than what we would have paid under the smoothing program, and is estimated to lead to a savings of approximately \$9.1 million over the next 15 years.

Our fiscal restraint has brought us this far. The decisions we made have yielded short-term and long-term savings, but we must continue to pursue greater efficiency in City operations wherever possible. To that end I will be forming a City Operations Review Committee of city staff tasked with examining each service we provide as a government. This group will work throughout the year asking the fundamental questions about City services. Are we the best ones to provide a given service? Could we work with others to provide it better or less expensively? Should this service be provided at all? How can we further streamline each operation? This Committee will approach City operations and budgeting with the philosophy of an essential services funding model. We need to be focused on providing the core services that make city living great, and this Committee will ensure we are on the best possible footing, functionally and financially, to do so.

As we look ahead, and consider what must be done in these challenging times to enhance the quality of life in our city and sustain our neighborhoods, we must also remember to gather strength from our victories. Our collective progress is as evident as ever in our downtown. Our

burgeoning downtown renaissance has built new momentum, with a steady stream of redevelopment projects recently completed or underway.

The Pike Block, located at the corner of South Salina and Fayette Streets, is signaling new life at the crossroads of our city. This important 4-building redevelopment project in the heart of downtown is drawing closer to completion. The ground floor boasts a new café and sandwich shop, and the upper floors are now home to the offices of CenterState CEO. New apartments are also coming on line at this location, with nearly half of the project's 67 units already occupied.

Just down the street to the west you'll find the completed Inns at Armory Square project. These two new Marriott hotels opened in summer 2013 at the corner of Franklin and Fayette Streets. Formerly a surface parking lot, this was one of the largest new construction projects completed downtown in the last 25 years.

Heading east from the Pike Block, you'll find storefronts continue to fill up with new tenants. Gannon's Ice Cream – a much-celebrated Syracuse favorite – opened its downtown shop on Jefferson Street last May in Dey's Centennial Plaza.

Across the street Jolime Café also opened its doors in May.

And between these two new downtown businesses, the transformation of a public space took a big step in 2013. Bank Alley, long seen only as a dirty vehicular access-way for deliveries and garbage removal, has begun to reflect this new downtown energy. Half of this two-block project was completed in 2013. With new energy efficient LED lighting, green infrastructure from Save the Rain, and a meandering paving scheme that calms traffic, Bank Alley is becoming a more attractive, pedestrian friendly space that will better serve and connect our downtown community.

Adjacent to Bank Alley, the Merchants Commons building, home to the Syracuse Media Group and 66 new apartments, is now fully occupied.

Alto Cinco, of Westcott Street fame, has opened a second location – Otro Cinco – on Warren Street.

And just down the block, at the corner of South Salina and Washington Streets, Clark's Ale House is slated to return to the downtown community after a more than three year hiatus.

While each of these projects is heartening, what is perhaps more exciting is the collective impact on the core of our city. Each investment builds on the last, and it is now clear that downtown revitalization is not confined to Armory Square. New life is spreading to Salina Street, Warren Street and beyond.

Looking further down Warren Street, however, we still see a Syracuse gem waiting to be polished. The Hotel Syracuse has been out of operation since 2004 and attempts to jumpstart a renovation project at this downtown landmark have, so far, fallen short. Changing ownership, complications from bankruptcy proceedings, and evasion of seizure by the City through property tax foreclosure have clouded responsibility for the property and caused redevelopment efforts to stall out.

Last month Syracuse native Ed Riley, and his Syracuse Community Hotel Restoration Company, wrote a letter to the Syracuse Industrial Development Agency requesting the agency acquire the Hotel Syracuse property through eminent domain. In response, SIDA has authorized a Preferred Developer Agreement with Mr. Riley, declared its intent to act as Lead Agency for the project's environmental review, and authorized a public hearing to be held next month on this eminent domain action.

Mr. Riley's intentions are to undertake a \$57 million renovation project to develop a full-service, 261-room Hyatt Hotel with ground-floor retail, a restored lobby and new meeting spaces.

We are excited to work with Mr. Riley, and County Executive Mahoney and her team to make this project a reality.

As these successes mount and more people choose to live, work and visit our downtown, we must consider how technology opens new doors to making our city more livable and convenient. In recent months the City has been researching a smart phone application called Whoosh!, which allows users to pay for their parking spaces by phone.

Already in use in dozens of European cities, this app allows you to use your smart phone to pay the meter remotely, and even add time without having to go back to your car. With the sort of weather we have had lately, I think we could all see the benefit of not having to fuss with change at the meter.

We plan to roll out this new app by this summer.

These and many other projects are indicators of the progress our city has made. I am proud of the role my administration has played in the unprecedented level of economic development we have seen in recent years, and I believe this progress is something we should all be proud of as a community. The old school mentality of chasing smokestacks and massive projects billed as the silver bullet saviors of the city is a failed ideology. True community revitalization comes from organic, diverse, authentic and sustainable development projects.

Authenticity should be the watchword of how we seek to build up our city. I want to briefly address the issue of a new stadium in our community, around which discussions have

swirled these last couple weeks. Any large project, particularly one involving Syracuse athletics, is, of course, bound to generate public interest.

While I am neither for nor against a stadium project necessarily, I believe that outstanding questions should be answered, and that we should be as thoughtful as possible about what could be a once-in-a-generation decision. To quote American inventor and engineer Charles Kettering, “A problem well-stated is a problem half-solved.”

I have been consulting with SU Chancellor Kent Syverud, and am interested in fostering a transparent and inclusive community discussion on this subject. To that end I will be establishing a task force charged with examining this issue and considering what our community needs and expectations are, what appropriate neighborhood and economic development might look like, what the current condition of the Dome is, and what the impacts of a new stadium might be.

I intend to announce the members of this task force in the coming days, and I think we can all agree: if this is worth doing, it is worth doing right.

While issues of development downtown and in our urban core frequently draw acclaim, it is only part of our economic development success story. From the Inner Harbor to Westcott Street to Genesee Street to North Salina Street to James Street in Eastwood, we have seen new energy in our neighborhood commercial districts as small businesses pop up and aesthetic conditions improve. These neighborhood scale commercial corridors are part of what makes a city a great place to live. Walkable, accessible places that offer a diversity of services and experiences are crucial to an appealing and engaging urban landscape.

While some neighborhood business districts have shown positive movement in recent years, we know we still have much work to do. Many of these corridors still suffer from vacancy, deteriorated building stock and quality of life challenges.

In the past, the City of Syracuse has partnered with local businesses and non-profit organizations to successfully apply to New York State for funds through its Main Street program. While these funds have helped to support the economic vitality of some of our commercial areas, others have missed out on state funding and are in need of assistance.

That is why tonight I am announcing the creation of the Syracuse Main Street program. The City of Syracuse, through the Department of Neighborhood and Business Development and the Syracuse Economic Development Corporation – SEDCO – will allocate \$400,000 of federal grant monies this year to help support businesses located in the South Avenue commercial corridor and in the Butternut Circle/Grant Boulevard commercial corridor.

This pilot program will make funds available on a first come, first served basis to businesses that need help with renovations including façade improvements, mechanical repairs, building expansion, even new sidewalks or landscaping. This funding, in grant amounts up to \$50,000, will require a 25% match from program applicants, but will be flexible and will help provide the leg up our neighborhood small businesses need to succeed and further strengthen our community.

I want to thank Commissioners Paul Driscoll, Ben Walsh and Stephanie Pasqual for their efforts to make this program a reality.

Our Department of Neighborhood and Business Development has also been partnering to help provide new affordable housing opportunities in our community. Renovation projects have

been completed at seven of the former Eljay properties in 2013. These formerly vacant buildings, now rehabilitated, include: the Hillside Apartments on East Genesee Street; the West Park Apartments at the old Roosevelt Apartments on South Salina Street; Kasson Place on James Street; and the Leonard Apartments on West Street. In total, these projects bring 161 new units of quality, affordable housing to the people of our community.

I want to thank our project partners Conifer Development, the Syracuse Housing Authority and the National Housing Trust for their commitment to our city.

2013 was also an exciting year in the development of a new organization that is advancing the cause of neighborhood reinvestment – the Greater Syracuse Land Bank. Years of work from local government officials, as well as our partners at CenterState CEO, state government and others, finally led to the Land Bank getting up and running last year.

The creation of the Land Bank has enabled the City to dramatically alter its tax collection policies, helping to bring in more revenue in delinquent property taxes. Between July and December of 2012, the City collected just under \$1.5 million in delinquent taxes and fees. During the same period in 2013, the City collected over \$2.5 million dollars. This represents a more than 69% increase in collection of delinquent property taxes and fees, and illustrates the impact that the Land Bank is already beginning to have on City revenues.

Meanwhile more properties are moving into the Land Bank's inventory, allowing for improved property maintenance and stabilization in our neighborhoods. Since the Land Bank began acquiring properties in October, it has taken ownership of 139 properties, and has already completed its first six home sales to new owners. This demonstrates the Land Bank's objectives

of moving properties into the hands of qualified buyers who will pay taxes and complete projects that improve our community.

The Land Bank was also recognized as a leading organization last year as it was awarded \$3 million by New York State Attorney General Eric Schneiderman to support the renovation of 50 single-family homes and demolition of 20 blighted properties too deteriorated for rehabilitation. This \$3 million competitive award was the largest in New York State.

I want to recognize Land Bank Executive Director Katelyn Wright and Board members Vito Sciscioli, Mary Beth Primo, Dan Barnaba, Dwight Hicks and Jim Corbett. Thank you for all your hard work in leading this paradigm-changing organization.

As we guide private development, support small businesses, improve our housing stock and enrich our community assets we must never lose sight of the issues most fundamental to our collective quality of life. Public safety is – and has always been – a prime focus of my administration.

We all know that 2013 was a difficult year, particularly when it comes to homicides. 22 homicides in 2013 was the highest annual number since 2008, and the third highest number in the last 12 years. Not only are the numbers troubling, but the stories have been heartbreaking. This sort of violence shakes our sense of security and community, and we must continue our efforts conduct smart policing strategies, and address the underlying challenges associated with this violence.

One of these strategies has been the use of cameras in some areas of our city in which data has shown higher crime trends. After a successful program on the Near Westside, we expanded the program with 32 new cameras in six neighborhoods: the Westside, Skunk City, the

Midland Avenue corridor, the South Avenue and Tallman Street area, Central Village, and the Butternut Street corridor. Already these new deployments have had an impact. Cameras have captured several shootings and armed robberies, assisted police in identifying both witnesses and suspects in several cases, and helped to detect a citywide commercial burglary trend which was then thwarted by our officers. These cameras have even helped lead to arrests in two homicide cases.

Our efforts to combat gang violence continue as well. The Syracuse TRUCE program began in February of 2013. TRUCE is a partnership between law enforcement, service providers and the community, that is designed to target gang and gun violence by focusing deterrence with a small number of chronic offenders. The platform for this deterrence is direct communication with gang and group members in sessions called TRUCE notifications. Since the program began, 10 TRUCE notifications have been held with more than 200 gang members. These notifications communicate the consequences of violent behavior, but also offer direct social service and other supports. So far 35 gang members have accepted these services, showing their desire to choose a nonviolent future. Since the start of the program there has been a 32% decline in gang related shootings and homicides.

In September of last year Syracuse was one of six cities in the nation to receive an Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention grant to expand the TRUCE program. The Police Department and Bureau of Research successfully applied for \$1.5 million that has allowed the City to hire a Gang Project Director who will coordinate gang violence reduction efforts across the city, and enhance our service offerings to at-risk populations. I want to acknowledge the newly hired Gang Project Director, Lawrence Williams, and thank him for his commitment to this new endeavor.

We have also been focused on quality of life issues throughout our neighborhoods. In 2013 we placed a new emphasis on corner stores. While many of these stores are good neighbors and important community anchors, some have come to operate with blatant disregard for the law and for basic health and safety standards. Over the last year we have brought together staff from more than half a dozen departments to coordinate unannounced inspections at 51 different stores. Having just completed our latest round of these inspections this week, we have uncovered a variety of unsatisfactory conditions, which has led to closure of 17 stores for at least 24 hours, and the issuance of 443 violations. I am happy to say that we are now seeing greatly improved rates of compliance around the city.

Additionally the Police Department conducted a sting operation in 2013 that targeted stores suspected of selling stolen property. This led to the arrest of nine different offenders from seven different stores, and a total of 40 separate charges.

While this attention to corner stores has made a positive impact in our neighborhoods, it has also exposed weaknesses in our regulations. Corner stores, as well as bars, restaurants and drugstores, must obtain a Certificate of Use from the City in order to operate legally. The purpose of this certificate is to gain compliance with basic health, safety and other standards, but these regulations have grown outdated and left gaps in our ability to ensure business owners live up to their responsibilities. City staff has been working to revise this ordinance to improve internal administration, hold both property owners and business operators accountable, authorize the Police Department to conduct criminal background checks on applicants, and establish strict daily fines for violations. We will be bringing this legislation to the Common Council for passage in the next few weeks.

From the use of cameras and new technology, to innovative programs like Syracuse TRUCE, to concentrating on quality of life issues, we believe these coordinated initiatives make an impact. Burglaries, robberies, aggravated assaults, and shots fired with injuries were all down in 2013. I want to thank our Police Department and Chief Frank Fowler for his continued leadership, and his relentless efforts to protect our city.

While we continue the important work of sustaining our neighborhoods, and focus on public safety, housing and economic development, we must remember that a city is not a collection of buildings or projects, but rather a community of people. Investing in our people in the face of immense financial constraints is the critical challenge of our time. The successful cities of the 21st Century will be those who forge a progressive agenda, and commit themselves to confronting concentrated poverty, unemployment, hunger and homelessness. Nearly 55% of children in Syracuse live below the poverty line. Justice, equality, opportunity: these are all issues dear to the people of Syracuse.

There is perhaps no clearer pathway to opportunity than education, and Syracuse remains at the forefront of cities making unprecedented investments in our young people. The groundbreaking Say Yes to Education program is in its sixth year, and the impact of Say Yes continues to grow. It is well known that more than 2,000 graduates of our City high schools now attend college tuition free. There are 5,000 City students in Say Yes afterschool programs and another 4,000 attend the Say Yes summer program.

Perhaps not as well known is that thousands of students and their families are now receiving additional services from a network of support staff in collaboration between the City, County and school district. There are now school and family support specialists in all 35 City

schools. These partners meet with teachers and staff to identify students whose performance is negatively impacted by out-of-school factors. The team reaches out to families to get at core issues affecting attendance and behavior issues, and identify resources to help those students and their families.

I want to thank and encourage the leadership from the Syracuse City School District, Say Yes to Education, Onondaga County and all of our partners in their ongoing commitment to our children and their families.

Another example of our collective dedication to students is the Joint School Construction Board program – or JSCB. Phase One of JSCB, a \$150 million project, had been in limbo for years. A top priority in my first term was getting JSCB back on track and completing Phase One. I am proud to say that we have done just that. Renovation projects are now complete at the Institute of Technology at Central, Fowler High School, Dr. Weeks School, and just a few weeks ago students returned to their classrooms at HW Smith School.

Furthermore we made bold commitments in JSCB Phase One to Minority and Women-Owned Business Enterprise participation. We set aggressive goals both for M/WBE contractor participation, as well as for M/WBE workers. As you can see, we not only met, but exceeded all program goals. Numbers like these are virtually unprecedented for a project this size in our community, and we should be proud of them.

Additionally our JSCB job training program through the SUNY EOC has had great success. Through this program we have leveraged the investment of the schools reconstruction program to engage more than 600 individuals in job training, with 273 individuals being issued OSHA cards, 112 receiving asbestos licenses, and 168 people receiving job placements.

Moving forward we are launching JSCB Phase Two, and are excited about continuing this transformation around our school district.

Bold determination and harnessing the creative power of our community is essential to innovation, and to tackling the major challenges of our time. One issue that will stand as a defining issue for Syracuse is what to do about Route 81.

The last year has seen robust community discussion, with the New York State Department of Transportation beginning the environmental study process for the project. While many opinions have been put forth already, the amount and detail of information provided to the community by the State DOT thus far has been underwhelming. In order to have a fully informed opinion the public should understand the specific design, community, economic development, environmental, traffic and other impacts associated with the alternatives under consideration.

I have expressed my concerns to State DOT Commissioner Joan McDonald, and I want to thank her for her willingness to work with this community.

I have also expressed to her my interests relative to project goals. I believe that solutions should look beyond the I-81 corridor itself, and that the study should include the surrounding street grid and overall transportation network.

Short commute times should not dictate the analysis of different alternatives. Getting to and from the urban core in a timely fashion is but one of many measures of successful design.

This process should be about people – not just about moving cars.

This is an opportunity to knit our urban fabric back together, enhance connectivity, and make our city safer and more livable.

We should also be focused on solutions that create development opportunities, utilize urban planning best practices, and serve and connect the economic engines of our urban core neighborhoods.

The urban renewal era of the mid-Twentieth Century was one of communities ignored and opportunities missed. Moving forward, this process must be one of broad community inclusion. Those analyzing design alternatives should be mindful of neighborhood impacts, social justice issues, economic opportunity, environmental justice considerations and many other matters important to our people.

What we do with Route 81 will distinguish our community, one way or another, for the next several decades. Let's make this decision a shining example of our creativity, our progressivism, and the richness of our city.

Indeed, all that we do in public service today – all that we do as a community – should aspire to that ideal. I, for one, subscribe to the belief that what we do should be exceptional, should be of service to our entire community, and should rise to the creative spirit of the people who live here.

That creativity – that ability to question everything and reimagine our community – is something we must all reach back and draw upon to seize the promise the 21st Century holds for cities all over the globe. Whether we're talking about a highway, college tuition, a creek or an old school, ingenuity and reinvention should be our guiding principles.

Not that all of our decisions will get splashy headlines or garner national accolades. Not that the work of government will always be particularly thrilling or dignified. But responsible

leadership, the will to continue challenging the status quo, and the promise to make the smart and tough choices, will point us to that brighter future.

I thank you for allowing me to work with you every day to strengthen our city, and I thank you for being here this evening. Goodnight.