



OFFICE OF THE MAYOR

Stephanie A. Miner, Mayor
January 28, 2010 – 6:30 p.m.
State of the City Address
SUNY-ESF, Marshall Hall

Thank you, Councilor Joy.

I would also like to recognize our colleagues on the Common Council: President Van Robinson, President Pro-Tem. Bill Ryan, Minority Leader Ryan McMahon, Majority Whip Tom Seals, Councilors Pat Hogan, Lance Denno, Jean Kessner, Nader Maroun and Matt Rayo. And I must say Happy Birthday to Councilor Rayo, who turns 24 tonight! I know how hard all of you work. I look forward to working with you to make Syracuse a vibrant city.

And, of course, President Murphy thank you too, for being such a gracious host. I can think of no better place than SUNY-ESF to host my first State of the City Address. As most of you know, ESF is the only college in the nation devoted exclusively to the study of the environment, developing renewable technologies and building a sustainable future. ESF is one shining example of the many institutions we in Syracuse are fortunate to have that stand ready to partner with us, to embrace innovation, and to create new opportunities for our region.

I would also like to recognize County Executive Joanie Mahoney's team here this evening: Deputy County Executive Bill Fisher, Deputy County Executive for Human Services Anne Rooney and Deputy County Executive for Physical Services Jean Smiley.

And thank you to the members of the County Legislature who have joined us, including Chairman Jim Rhinehart.

I would also like to recognize our state and federal representatives in attendance.

It is my honor and pleasure to stand before you this evening, as your 53rd mayor, to deliver my first State of the City Address. In my first four weeks in office I have been overwhelmed by the gracious outpouring of well-wishers from all walks of life. Indeed, every time I leave my house or City Hall I am approached by complete strangers congratulating me, volunteering their help, and, of course their warm wishes. And some of you may think that this phenomenon is a complete ego boost; well, as someone who spent a year working very hard to get here, I can tell you I welcome every word, but, much to my chagrin every well-wisher has said the exact same thing to me – “you look so much taller on TV.” I want to state for the record in case there is any confusion, I am not tall. I did not run for this office on the grounds that Syracuse needed a tall mayor and, thankfully, a majority of the voters agreed with me.

I stand before you tonight humbled by the warmth and generosity of the community in which we live. I know that I am not alone. The people of this community want us to succeed. They believe together we can achieve a brighter future.

There is no question we face enormous challenges. I now, as much as ever, realize the daunting work that must be done. But I also realize that in public service nothing meaningful is ever accomplished alone. The greatest asset of our city is its people. Because Syracuse is home to resilient, hard-working men and women; because Syracuse has always found a way to rise to the challenge; because the people of Syracuse are ready to turn the page, to renew our promise, and to meet our potential – I am proud to say to you tonight I believe the state of our city is strong.

But that strength will be tested. My message to you tonight is our initial salvo at how we will meet our challenges and live up to our promise in the face of a growing fiscal storm.

On this 28th day of my administration, let us begin with our agenda for the months ahead.

Any successful organization creates a culture of communication, cooperation and customer service. In order to provide the services our residents deserve, city government must adopt a greater commitment to sincere and effective customer service. That commitment and that high standard of service and accountability begins with me. It is my charge to ensure from City Hall to our parks to your curbside, the men and women providing our services are committed to going the extra mile for our residents, and never use the phrase, “that’s not my job.” Creating a stronger culture of customer service and accountability takes a commitment of leadership, and that is a commitment I am making to you tonight.

Part and parcel of that commitment is taking a new, more comprehensive look at how we can adopt innovative approaches to economic development policy as a region. Our local economy operates on a regional level that ignores municipal lines and arbitrary boundaries.

We can no longer afford to put so much time, money and effort into uncoordinated, although well-intentioned, economic development initiatives. Local governments must take new steps to help lead this movement toward more cohesive regional economic development policy. The city and county have rarely coordinated, and at times been at odds over, economic development strategies and projects.

Together, with County Executive Mahoney, we will change that.

I and the County Executive will locate both the city and county economic development staff in a single location by late this year. We are directing our staffs to work together to provide service and information to companies looking to expand or locate in this region. This partnership represents a new era in our economic development policy, one that recognizes the fates of our city and county are irrevocably tied. I want to acknowledge the leadership of County Executive Mahoney and her team for their commitment to this new partnership.

It is also important we strive for rational, unified organization within city government. Tonight I am announcing the creation of the Department of Neighborhood and Business Development,

led by Commissioner Paul Driscoll. This new department represents the merging of the former Departments of Community Development and Economic Development. Heretofore, these separate departments have operated in isolation. We need a cohesive and coordinated approach to revitalizing our city, both economically and socially. This new arrangement ensures revitalization efforts that target the commercial corridors and business districts are aligned with our goals and vision for the neighborhoods that surround them.

But internal reforms cannot stop there. In these tough economic times the people that operate businesses large and small here need predictable and efficient support from local government to fully succeed. I have heard repeatedly that archaic and convoluted permit, code and zoning processes stand in the way of reasonable development timelines.

Indeed, under the current system, sets of drawings are shipped for review to up to six different departments spread around the city. This process has too many sets of hands, delays approvals and is costly and frustrating to everyone from homeowners trying to add a simple deck to developers looking to put up an office building.

This year we will streamline our permit process and make it similar to Rochester's. I've authorized a reassignment of city staff who review plans and soon at least one member of each of these departments will be relocated to the City's Permit Desk. In the coming year, all our permitting and zoning processes will be reviewed to maximize efficiency and convenience. I'll work with the Council to seek legislative approvals for our recommendations.

Additionally, it is time city government finally gets serious about sound urban planning. Past arrangements have not made planning a priority, leaving absent the kind of comprehensive coordination, commitment to sustainable practices, and attention to the value of place we must be so acutely aware of. Multi-disciplinary, cross-departmental planning is essential to efficient government operations and to creating an urban environment that is appealing. To that end, I am announcing the creation of the Bureau of Planning & Sustainability, led by Director Andrew Maxwell. This Bureau will not be connected to an existing department but will stand apart to champion the principles of sound urban planning. Utilizing existing staff, the Bureau will focus on the execution of our planning and sustainability efforts. They will cooperate with nationally known resources at SUNY-ESF, the Center of Excellence, with Onondaga County's green infrastructure team, and countless others. This Bureau will help establish the City of Syracuse as a government and a community that truly wants to lead by example.

As a Councilor, I was continuously concerned about the money spent for administration within the former Community Development department.

As your Mayor, I stopped that practice. The city will spend less on Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) administrative and technical costs and put more money into housing rehab and building efforts. I will eliminate more than \$1 million in administrative and technical costs in 2010, nearly a 40 percent reduction in these costs. And the city will increase funds allocated to housing from \$1.36 million to \$2.45 million in 2010, more than an 85 percent increase over 2009.

We'll target those dollars in concert with the city's housing partners to renovate and build new housing units where we can have the largest strategic impact.

Additionally, tonight I am proposing that the 1 percent home improvement loan program, so popular in various target areas throughout the City, be available citywide.

All of this work requires constant input from residents and community-based organizations. Tomorrow's Neighborhoods Today, TNT, is a great opportunity for residents to interact with the city employees; however, TNT too needs to evolve. In cooperation with both TNT facilitators and participants, we, as a community, need to assess the process and determine whether it is continuing to meet our needs as we move forward into becoming a 21st Century City.

We also have to enhance the relevance of so many of our ad hoc resident-driven advisory councils and ensure the input from these groups is incorporated into the city's priorities and planning efforts. The most notable example of this challenge is the Community Development Advisory Committee (CDAC). In the past, the group has met intensively for three months to review applications for funding, without an opportunity to focus on a broader, long-term planning strategy. To move forward in this effort to develop a more meaningful method for community input, I am creating a Citizens Cabinet to be a vehicle for a consistent and vibrant dialogue between the Mayor's Office and community activists. The Cabinet will be comprised of two representatives from each of the City's TNT sectors, one chosen by the neighborhood and the other appointed by my office. The newly-formed Cabinet will meet regularly with me and act as a vehicle for providing guidance and feedback throughout the year on all of our activities. Corey Driscoll, our new Director of Constituent Services, will oversee the creation of the Cabinet and serve as a facilitator. The Citizens Cabinet will incorporate neighbors from throughout the city to act as a think tank of sorts, a way to provide the much needed two-way communication between the Mayor's Office and the community-at-large.

Say yes.

I recently spent several days in Washington, D.C. with Mayors from across the nation. Despite their passion for their cities, they all spoke of the daily struggle to find answers for the same familiar set of challenges – declining tax bases, high concentrations of poverty, an aging housing stock and most sadly, generations of young people searching for a glimmer of hope in urban landscapes.

Big or small, every city including Syracuse faces the same set of obstacles. But coming away from that meeting I was struck yet again by the realization that Syracuse has something no-one else does – the remarkable glimmer of hope that is Say Yes to Education.

I am more committed than ever to doing everything I can as Mayor to assure that Say Yes, now in its infancy, grows and becomes financially sustainable so it can reach its full promise for students and for parents selecting Syracuse as the place to raise their families.

It is important that the message of Say Yes is simple, loud and clear:

“Say Yes Is For Everyone.”

During the years when a child is enrolled in the Syracuse City School District, Say Yes will provide enhanced support and enrichment services that will make it possible for all our students to graduate from high school and meet college acceptance standards. And when each of these students is accepted, each one will receive tuition assistance, at a wide variety of outstanding colleges and universities.

That's why there are after school programs that now give extra help to 2,500 students. A summer enrichment program that will reach over 2,000 students this summer and served about 800 students this past summer. Citizens who realize the power of Say Yes are stepping forward. I attended a kick-off two weeks ago for social workers and health professionals who met for two days to design new programs to reach out and get more city students and families enrolled in available health care programs.

In November, 26 college financial aid staff began helping families navigate the maze of programs to get an early start to find every available dollar to get their children into and through Say Yes colleges. 248 students signed up to get that help from these volunteer coaches.

Hundreds of SU students and local businesspeople are stepping up to serve as volunteer mentors and tutors. With the leadership of Harris Beach, lawyers from area firms are donating their service in four free school-based law clinics to help some families deal with legal issues that can sidetrack a family and lead a child to drop out of school.

Say Yes is only in its second year. It can be transformational for our city but right now the program is at its most vulnerable. Now is the time to work with the visionary partners who brought Say Yes to Syracuse and communicate its benefits clearly to citizens who live in Syracuse or who are considering moving here.

By now you all know that Say Yes offers a tuition-free college education to anyone who graduates from a city high school. Right now about 600 graduates are attending the colleges you see above as part of Say Yes.

Under the current program, regardless of family income, an accepted student can receive a full tuition scholarship to all SUNY schools, to Syracuse University and to Cooper Union.

Tonight, in concert with the Say Yes Foundation, I am pleased to announce the Say Yes program will be enhanced to provide additional options for students from families with incomes of \$75,000 and over.

Through this new "Say Yes Choice Grant," students will be able to transfer the value of an available SUNY tuition scholarship to any participating Say Yes private compact college. This scholarship will make a significant difference in the cost of attending college.

That will make the Say Yes program attractive to every student and family in Syracuse, and it also will encourage even more private colleges and universities to join the Say Yes Compact.

I want to thank the Common Council and our state and federal representatives for their ongoing commitment to help Syracuse sustain Say Yes far into the future. The partners who work on a daily basis to run Say Yes deserve our thanks as well. With us tonight is Mary Anne Schmitt

Carey, president of Say Yes. I'd ask Mary Anne to stand and be recognized for her commitment to Syracuse.

And equally deserving of our recognition and thanks is SU Chancellor Nancy Cantor, who is unable to be here today. The Chancellor has lent her personal energy to the effort to recruit the many fine private institutions who are helping Syracuse offer a program that stands alone in the nation.

If we're going to invite families to Syracuse schools, we need to get busy rebuilding them. It's time to instill a sense of urgency to our Joint Schools Construction program.

Much effort has gone into planning by dozens of dedicated and well-intentioned leaders. But the community has grown impatient with years of discussions that have eroded public confidence in this Construction effort. Worse, three years of talk, but little action means more funds have been spent on consultants, leaving less for real construction. What was originally a \$225 million project has shrunk to \$138 million. A promise to renovate 7 schools has been reduced to 4.

It's time to start building. The JSCB must make its decisions about the scope of the project and the size of the budget for each school – and then stick to these decisions.

As Chair of the Joint Schools Construction Board, I intend to recruit people with construction experience and add them as members or monitors to the JSCB. As the first step in this new direction, I am naming Charles Merrihew, Vice President of Administration and External Affairs at Syracuse University, to begin serving on the board. He has directed the University's Warehouse renovation project, construction of the University's Tennity Ice Pavilion, and numerous campus renovations.

I will insist that all our discussions about which schools to renovate be based on intelligent analysis of student enrollment trends and a frank discussion on how many buildings we can afford to maintain.

Across Upstate, communities are grappling with new models of fiscal accountability for school districts. I've yet to make up my mind about what model is right for these times, but I am committed to studying the results of New York City's model and Rochester's legislative request.

As we monitor that debate I believe we need to fastforward efforts here to find ways to share administrative services to free up vital resources to maintain classroom instruction.

I've talked with Superintendent Lowengard and members of the school board and we will assign a team of people to study the consolidation of our information technology, finance, purchasing and facilities management departments. Our goal is for this group to present a recommendation by this summer. Collectively these functions cost the city and district approximately \$56 million per year.

These initiatives and others will ensure we deliver municipal and educational services more efficiently.

For as we look to the future and all that we would like to accomplish, we must keep in mind the financial constraints under which we must operate. And this is perhaps the most fundamental challenge this city and its school district are now facing – the reality of an unprecedented and rapid deterioration in our financial outlook.

Many do not realize this year the city and school district have balanced their budgets by using \$33.2 million in rainy day funds to pay for ongoing operations. In other words, in the current twelve month period, we will be paying out in expenses \$33.2 million more than we are taking in in revenues.

It does not take a financial wizard to understand this situation cannot continue indefinitely --- and that what once were seen as plentiful municipal reserves could soon be exhausted.

And this year's revenue imbalance will mean next year's city and school district budgets will start out \$33.2 million in the hole, even before factoring in any new expenses or declining revenues.

Yet, it seems each day brings additional budget pressures such as: multi-million dollar cuts in projected state aid to the city and the school district, shrinking sales tax revenues, increasing pension bills, rising utility costs, and the expiration of temporary federal stimulus funding.

In the past, we could seek the assistance of higher levels of government to help the city adjust to these types of pressures. But now, our major revenue sources -- the county and the state -- which together provide 65% of all of our revenues, are also projecting deficits and have a reduced capacity to respond.

Now more than ever, we must explore all avenues to improve efficiency and effectiveness in the delivery of municipal services. For example, I am committed to an aggressive review of current practices regarding the authorization of overtime, which currently totals \$18 million per year in the city workforce.

In addition, we must be open to taking a fresh look at our current financial situation and to taking advantage of the many civic-minded individuals willing to give of their time and expertise to offer their perspective on the challenges before us.

To these ends, I will appoint a Fiscal Review Task Force composed of experts in the municipal finance field and am charging them to:

- Provide an independent confirmation of city revenue and budget gap projections for the next two years,
- Provide an independent confirmation of School District revenue and budget gap projections for the next two years and
- Provide recommendations in the form of a menu of options to be investigated to address the pending deficits.

I want to thank the individuals who have agreed to serve on this Task Force.

In addition, Dave Moynihan of the City's outside auditing firm of Testone, Marshall & Discenza, has agreed to serve as consultant to the group, and the City and School District will provide staff support for this initiative. I look forward to reviewing the Task Force report which I view as a roadmap to our achieving financial stability.

One significant element of our financial plan will undoubtedly be revenues from the 4% local sales tax, which provides approximately \$65 million per year to the city and school district.

On December 31, 2010, the existing 10-year city/county sales tax agreement will expire. This agreement establishes the formula by which approximately \$279 million in annual revenue is distributed.

Soon discussions will begin that will lead to a new agreement. Too often in the past, these city/county negotiations have been marked by bickering rancor and parochialism. I pledge to work cooperatively with the County Executive, the Chairman of the County Legislature and other legislative leaders to devise a successor agreement that will benefit the entire region.

As we contemplate the perils and possibilities that lay ahead of us, it is with this spirit of honest and genuine cooperation that we must boldly face the future. Whether you work for city government or county government, public sector or private, live in the city, a town, or a village the imperative of collaboration has never been clearer. Truly, we are all in this together. As isolated entities and separate communities we will never accomplish what we can with one voice, one vision, one will to strive for the brighter future we know we can have. We must shake off the fear and hesitation that comes with doing things a new way, and boldly move forward to embrace the power of new ideas. Tonight, I invite you to join me in this spirit of cooperation. My success -- our success -- will not be measured by what I do each day in City Hall, but rather by what we do together in our neighborhoods, in our parks, and in our schools. There is much work to be done, and the stakes have never been higher. But together with an abiding respect for one another and an enduring love for our city, we can rise to the challenge, we can meet our potential, and we will renew the promise of Syracuse.

Thank you.