

2012
State of the City Address
By Mayor Gerald D. Jennings
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Working Harder and Smarter – A Smart City Strategy

Good evening President McLaughlin, members of the Council, my beautiful wife Mary Ann, family members, distinguished guests and my fellow citizens of Albany, and welcome to this report on the state of our great City.

It has always struck me that the State of the City message, mandated by Charter, is somehow a little less anticipated, and certainly far less anxiety-producing than our annual budget message – a time when what everyone wants to know is – are my taxes going up; is my job being cut, or is my favorite program being eliminated.

The State of the City message, however, tends to be largely more prosaic, both because it is broader in its scope and certainly in its purpose. Its aim is twofold. To reflect on our accomplishments during the year past and to chart a course for the year ahead and beyond.

As such, this is my opportunity to reflect on our accomplishments during the past year, to share with you an assessment on how well we are doing, and to articulate, if you will, a vision for our future.

Over the past several years and last year in particular, we have faced, as you well know, challenging financial times. But despite the challenges, we have continued to pursue critical economic development and public safety initiatives that I believe have enhanced the quality of life of our City and that have set the stage for even greater accomplishments to come.

Tonight you will hear a report on those initiatives and on the impressive progress we have achieved in the areas of economic development, neighborhood revitalization and in public safety. And you will hear about exciting new initiatives that will continue to move our City forward in the days, months, and even years ahead.

So I'll keep you in suspense no longer. Tonight, I am very pleased to say that despite the financial challenges facing our Nation and our State and the strain those challenges continue to place on our City, I believe that the state of our City is strong and that our future has never looked brighter. We have much to be proud of and we have a unique and compelling story to tell.

That story must begin with public safety. Government has no greater purpose than to ensure the safety and security of its citizenry.

Approximately two years ago, the City's Police Department began a fundamental change in the method in which police services are delivered in the City. Careful evaluation and consultation with community members led to the creation in 2011 of the Neighborhood Engagement Unit, a move that marked the Department's commitment to a proactive problem solving approach to crime that is based on strategic community partnerships.

Through hard work and through the commitment of every member of the Department to this community policing philosophy, I am proud to say that we have a significantly more efficient and effective police department. And consequently, we have a safer City as well.

In fact, I don't think it's at all an exaggeration to state that our Department is one of the finest, if not the finest, in the Nation.

The evidence is clear. We have a department that is highly trained, highly skilled, highly educated, highly dedicated, highly motivated, and highly committed to excellence in their service to the community.

And look at the results - for 2011, significant crimes, or so called Part 1 crimes, continued to decrease in almost every category – continuing a 6-year trend.

As importantly, the Department's closer working relationship with the community has fostered an enhanced feeling of security and confidence – confidence that the Department is on the cutting edge in the use of training and technology in crime solving; confidence that it is a Department focused on fostering a better working relationship with the community and confidence that the Department is highly effective in the overall mission of making our community safer.

In that regard, the City was successful in its application for a Federal grant to increase the authorized strength of our Department from 326 officers to 342 officers. Just last week, I had the great honor of swearing in these new officers, and tonight I want to again congratulate them and wish them well in the service of our community.

I also want to thank all of the members of our community who have invested their time and effort to making our community policing initiatives a success.

And I want to especially thank Chief Krokoff, his command staff and the men and women of the Albany Police Department for the outstanding work they do in often very difficult and very dangerous circumstances. Please know, our City appreciates all that you do to make us a better and safer community.

We are equally proud of the difficult work done every day by the men and women of our City's Fire and Emergency Services Department.

Rated yearly as one of the busiest fire departments in the Nation, Chief Forezzi and his staff can boast of exemplary response times for emergency calls and for having saved the lives of so many of our citizens.

Training, training and more training – are hallmarks not only of the Police Department, but of our Fire Department as well.

Our firefighters must be and are prepared to handle complex hazmat incidents, major fire calls, and thousands of emergency medical responses necessary in an urban center that includes an industrial port, a warehouse district, an internationally renown nanotechnology site, major medical centers, high-rise office

complexes, interstate highways and ancient streets designed more for horse and wagon than modern day fire trucks.

But our men and women firefighters do their job as well as or better than firefighters anywhere in the Nation. And in addition, they also handle fire investigations and building inspections – and they do all of these tasks with excellence and in great service to protect the people of our Albany, and for that, our City is most grateful.

During 2011, the Department's Division of Buildings and Codes underwent a change in both leadership and in focus.

Under its new Director, Jeff Jamison, we have significantly increased our efforts at code compliance and our efforts to hold negligent property owners accountable.

By working closely with the Fire Department and other involved City agencies on our highly successful Block-by-Block initiative, the Division has clearly made a difference in improving the quality of life in our City's many and diverse neighborhoods.

Key to our code enforcement initiatives and to our Block-by-Block program will be the creation of a comprehensive data system that will allow departments and residents alike to share information critical to developing comprehensive and immediate responses to problem housing situations.

In a moment, I will discuss more on our efforts with regards to the development of such a data system, but already Director Jamison and his staff have changed the culture of the Department.

They recognize that what they do is as important as any to the public safety and to the quality of life of our City. Their efforts are making our neighborhoods safer, and our City thanks them.

During 2011, I directed our City's Law Department to work closely in the code enforcement effort, and as a result, the Law Department on a weekly basis now prosecutes in City Codes Court quality of life offenses, such as littering and open container law violations. This initiative, as well as the Department's vigorous pursuit of negligent property owners in Vacant Buildings Court, has been an integral part of the success of our Block-by-Block initiative.

The Department faces on a daily basis many sensitive and complex legal issues, and their professionalism is always guided by what is ultimately in the best interests of the people of Albany, and we are most grateful for their counsel.

Perhaps no department, however, has been more instrumental to the success of Block-by-Block and to the overall quality of life of our City, than our Department of General Services.

With a portfolio of responsibilities that ranges from street, building and parks maintenance, to engineering services; landfill operations and special events, Commissioner Nick D'Antonio and the hard working men and women of the Department are on the front line every day.

In the past year, the Department completed both Phase I and Phase II of the Pine Bush Restoration Project. The scope of this project encompasses some 250 acres of property surrounding the landfill. And the intent of the project is to reestablish a native Pine Bush habitat that will one day make this area of the Pine Bush a true destination for generations to come.

The Department also completed the \$4.5 million State Street rehabilitation project, which I believe is already proving to be a catalyst project for the economic revitalization of this historic main street corridor.

Additionally, the Department completed 55 in-house street reconstruction projects, maintained hundreds of acres of parkland, planted thousands of flowers to beautify streetscapes and neighborhoods throughout the City, and produced stunning special events, free of charge, that attracted thousands of residents and visitors alike, helping to create a year-round sense of vibrancy in our City. For all of this, we thank the Department of General Services.

So by now, you've probably noticed, I'm more than just a little proud and grateful to the men and women who, day in and day out, show such dedication and commitment to our City.

Our department heads, directors, their staffs, and in fact, our entire workforce, do an outstanding job of serving our City, and I am grateful to each and every one of them for the great work they do.

I particularly want to mention the members of my own senior staff, Phil, Chris, and Bob, for the long hours and hard work they put in every day. They do it with smiles and patience and professionalism, and I thank them.

I am also grateful to all of the volunteers and to the members of the Council, and to an involved citizenry, for helping us accomplish what we have accomplished, in the face of great financial challenges.

You will recall that in preparing for 2011, we faced a budget shortfall of nearly \$23 million dollars, and we were forced to take some painful actions.

We reduced departmental expenses across the board; we cut 155 City employees; we sold City property, and we used a significant portion of our fund balance to close the gap. And, in preparing for our recently adopted 2012 budget, we faced similar financial

challenges, coupled with news of significant cuts to federal programs, and a State mandated 2% property tax cap.

Yet, in the face of all of these financial challenges, we've continued to provide the highest quality of services to assure that our City enjoys the highest quality of life.

And, significantly, our City continues to enjoy the highest bond rating in the State outside of New York City. How has this been possible? Quite simply because we've managed well and because we've worked harder and smarter to get the job done.

An example. As you know, our City has one of the oldest water and sewer systems in the Country. A significant portion of our water mains were installed in the 19th Century, and our Civil War era sewer system is even older. Proper maintenance of systems as old as these is critical in insuring that they continue to function well into the future.

Albany is still one of the only municipalities in the region that uses its own sophisticated high-tech leak detector equipment to find underground leaks. Not only does this program reduce the amount of wasted water, but helps prevent the significant issues and expense that could result from underground mains collapsing.

In fact, the Department's program has been praised as a model by the National League of Cities. And in 2011, for the first time in the City's history, our water was selected as one of the 5 best tasting waters in the Nation in a competition sponsored by the U. S. Conference of Mayors. For this, and all they do, I want to thank Commissioner Cross and the hard-working men and women of the Albany Water Department.

As to working smarter and harder to get a job done, that has certainly been the case with our Economic Development initiatives –

initiatives that have been the catalyst for both investment and economic development in nearly every section of our City.

As an example, this past summer, Governor Cuomo announced a new Statewide economic development initiative and challenged us to think and act regionally.

In response to the Governor's challenge, I directed my staff to work with the development team at Capitalize Albany Corporation to convene local economic development stakeholders and agencies to build consensus on where economic and business development funding would be most critical and would create the most sustainable regional benefits.

Using the feedback from these activities, and the recommendations of the Albany 2030 plan, my economic development team developed a Local Advisory Report that helped us secure \$13 million dollars in State funding for a number of

significant community and economic development projects. We are thankful for this State support, and look forward to the next round of Economic Development Council funding.

Tonight, I especially want to use this opportunity to once again thank Governor Cuomo for his extraordinary leadership, and in particular, for the great support he has given our City. I know he is committed to making Albany one of the greatest capital cities in the Nation, and we are incredibly grateful to him for that commitment.

On a personal level, I want to thank him for his great friendship. We are lucky indeed to have him as our Governor and we wish him and all of our State leaders great success in moving our State forward. Thank you, Andrew, you're the best.

Speaking of the best, this past Christmas season, one of the best bands of all time, Chicago, performed at the Palace Theatre. Before their performance, they were kind enough to join us for the

State Street lighting ceremony. At the event, the band members told the audience how they've been to Albany several times over many years, and how impressed they were with how much the City has transformed over the years – and how beautiful the City now looks.

That's why they're the best, and of course, they are absolutely correct – our City has transformed.

Since I launched Capitalize Albany over 16 years ago, we've seen billions of dollars invested and thousands of new jobs created. And in that time period, Albany has become the leading center in the world for nanotechnology.

I believe that in short order, the effects of our development initiatives as well as the nanotechnology boom, will lead to the long awaited development of the Harriman Campus and will make Albany a true destination Capital City for jobs and for even greater

development, including the development of a long overdue convention center for New York's State Capital.

This new economic development will mean that our children will not have to move elsewhere to live and to find great employment opportunities. And it will bring even more revitalization to our historic neighborhoods that even now are going through some exciting and remarkable transformations.

Just look at the development that has taken place in the City's South End. I am pleased to report that since the Capital South Plan was released 4 years ago, more than \$72 million dollars has been invested, and more than 188 new housing units have been developed or are underway.

Just this past November, the Albany Housing Authority completed construction on a \$10 million dollar South End housing

project, and construction is expected to begin in late 2012 on a new \$13 million dollar 56-unit housing project.

Also during 2011, HUD awarded the City \$4.98 million dollars for the construction of the Capital South Campus Center, an exciting new neighborhood college concept for the South End. The Campus Center will be a hub of activity, hosting training, education and community functions, while incorporating child care and youth programming for the purpose of stabilizing disadvantaged families and positioning them for the employment opportunities of tomorrow.

This 14,300 square foot facility will contain an industrial kitchen for the Meals on Wheels program and for culinary arts training; classrooms, including one specializing in urban agriculture; offices for intake, assessment and early intervention counseling; a computer lab; drop-in daycare, and a student café and lounge. The Campus Center is part of a larger redevelopment plan

for Lincoln Square Homes, and is another example of Albany working harder and smarter to achieve innovative results.

Significant transformation is going on as well in our City's Arbor Hill neighborhood, where major public-private partnership projects are making tremendous strides.

Just last month, financing closed on a major redevelopment project on North Swan Street, that involves an historic 41,000 square foot building that has sat vacant for years, acting as a blight on the neighborhood. The project, known as Academy Lofts, will offer new life to the community with 21 live-work spaces as well as a ground floor dedicated to commercial activity.

Also in Arbor Hill, implementation of a \$5.1 million dollar Neighborhood Revitalization Program grant is underway that will fully rehab 9 properties, 33 rental units and a single family home, that are presently some of the most neglected properties in the

neighborhood. I am looking forward to welcoming new families to these fully restored spaces later this year.

We are also very pleased that Albany was awarded \$3.2 million dollars in funding through the Governor's Regional Economic Council process for the redevelopment of the IDA Yarbrough Homes. This investment will mean quality of life improvements to this 11.5 acre site that was identified as a priority project in the Arbor Hill Neighborhood Plan.

In fact, since the Arbor Hill Neighborhood Plan was released in 2003, over \$65 million dollars has been invested in Arbor Hill, with more than 100 new or renovated housing units, the construction of a new state-of-the-art public library, as well as significant road infrastructure improvements and small business development.

Another significant neighborhood transformation is the one occurring in Park South. This year, we celebrated the 5-year anniversary of the adoption of the Park South Urban Renewal Plan. The stunning results of this careful planning effort include more than half a billion dollars in investment in this neighborhood, and that investment is climbing.

Additionally, market indicators for the neighborhood show improved rental rates, increased home values and most importantly, a steady decline in calls for public safety.

Local homeowners, businesses and landlords are seeing the Park South neighborhood in a new light as evidenced by the estimated \$20 million dollars in private investments they have made to improve their properties. There is no question, Park South has now become a neighborhood of choice.

Another new neighborhood of choice is downtown Albany. That's right, I said downtown Albany. After years of planning, and the investment of millions in infrastructure improvements, our downtown can boast of dozens of new residential units on State Street, Pearl Street, Broadway, Sheridan Avenue, and other historic streets throughout the downtown area.

These new high-quality apartments and condos have opened in significant part because of the efforts of our Albany IDA and our economic development staff, as well as our strategic partnership with Capitalize Albany and the Downtown Business Improvement District.

Together, we developed a collective and centralized effort to promote living downtown and to brand the district as a true neighborhood. Today, when you visit downtown, you'll be reminded to "Look Up" to see the residential conversions happening on upper floors of buildings throughout the district.

The tremendously successful Downtown Living Showcase this past October welcomed hundreds of prospective Downtown neighbors, and because of the interest shown, I am very happy to say that new units are continuing to be developed to fill the overwhelming new demand to live in Albany's newest neighborhood of choice.

This long-awaited development is a true testament to the value of working harder and working smarter, and to recognizing the value of long-term, public planning.

In that regard, 2011 marked a historical achievement in planning for the City of Albany. As you know, after 2 years of work and significant public input, the City's first-ever Comprehensive Plan was presented to the Common Council for consideration and adoption. The plan has already received great local as well as national acclaim, and I am so proud of the result.

The Comprehensive Plan recommends a series of projects, strategies and actions to be undertaken by the City in pursuit of achieving the future envisioned by the more than 2,000 community stakeholders who participated, and who provided recommendations to us on the environment, on land use, on the local economy, on transportation, on housing, on future development, and on the social, community and cultural fabric of our City.

Albany 2030 is a tangible commitment to robust, inclusive community engagement, and the City is committed to following its guidelines for all aspects of civic life between now and 2030.

In fact, our City departments have already begun incorporating Albany 2030 principles into grant funding requests, current City projects, special initiatives and daily operations.

I challenge the Albany community – our citizens, business owners, employees and visitors – to embrace Albany 2030 and to utilize its vision through decisions you make in your daily lives. By utilizing this vision, we can ensure that Albany will be a vibrant, safe and healthy place where our children and grandchildren want to live, work and visit for generations to come.

Increasing homeownership is one of the Plan’s important recommendations. Toward that goal, one of the most successful initiatives of our Economic Development Office was the creation of a new homeownership program called Choose Albany.

The response to the program was overwhelming, and, as a result, 25 applicants have become new homeowners in the City. Choose Albany assisted homebuyers in neighborhoods throughout the City, including the South End, Delaware Avenue, and Midtown. The purchase price of homes ranged from \$87,000 to \$187,000 for a total of \$3.7 million dollars in new home investment.

While all of the program's funds have been committed, I am so proud of its success that I am determined to add additional funds in 2012.

All of our efforts in development and planning have been accomplished with a constant eye on the City's future. My administration has been progressive in adopting new policies, including policies for sustainable development and energy efficiency. This is a major reason why I established the Office of Energy & Sustainability to work with other municipal departments and the community at large to design and implement programs that will reduce energy use and associated costs and move our City forward on its commitment and reputation for becoming a sustainable community.

During 2011, the Office engaged a Community Advisory Committee to assist with the identification and prioritization of

effective climate action strategies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from the community at large. The result of this effort was the City's first community-wide climate action plan that was incorporated into Albany 2030.

For their effective development and planning efforts and for helping lead us into a new era of growth and opportunity - we thank Commissioner Yevoli and his Economic Development and Planning staff as well as the folks at the Albany Community Development Agency, the Albany IDA, and Capitalize Albany and, of course, the Albany Housing Authority. You certainly all have made a difference in improving our City's quality of life, and you have helped us chart a path for future development.

Albany, like many cities around the world, has recognized that to become a smarter city, one that provides the level of service

citizens expect while operating with maximum efficiency, we must use information and technology in new and innovative ways.

Whether through community building efforts or attention to internal efficiencies, new capabilities to capture, manage and use information must be created.

I'm sure you've all often wondered whether there are there ways that Albany can better use the cloud to be more responsive to providing data and other information to our citizens. The cloud, of course, is just one of the information technology opportunities for us to study and to explore in delivering programs and services.

It is an opportunity cities are just beginning to pay attention to, and Albany has already invested in a number of specific efforts to understand what kinds of capabilities are most needed to operate at this new level.

Recent performance management audits have made recommendations about the foundational policy, management, and technology changes that must be made if our City is to become a more technologically advanced smarter city.

The reports call for many significant upgrades to the City's internal operating environment including the development of new city-wide records management policies and procedures, new procedures for key business processes such as code enforcement, and new technology.

They also recommend several major technology infrastructure initiatives and related hires, including hiring a chief information officer. What is currently missing, however, is a roadmap for City officials that links the recommended investments in policy, management, and technology capabilities to the City's policy and program priorities.

Such a document would lay out those priorities as well as a plan of work to ensure that any investments made provide the foundation for Albany to become a smarter city technologically.

So tonight, I am pleased to announce a new collaboration with the Center for Technology in Government and the College of Computing and Information at the University at Albany.

These two leading institutions will work over the next year with officials from the City of Albany to create a comprehensive roadmap that will outline the set of strategic and tactical steps necessary to meet Albany's short and mid-term goals as well as those of the Albany 2030 plan.

With this roadmap, Albany will be on its way in using technology as a means to be more in touch with and more responsive to its citizens and to being a truly "smarter" City. I want to thank

CTG and SUNY for partnering with us on this exciting venture, and we look forward to their recommendations.

The last department I will report on tonight is perhaps the one closest to my heart. It is, of course, the department most directly focused on delivering programs and services to our youngest residents – our Department of Youth and Workforce Services and Recreation. Under Commissioner John D’Antonio’s leadership, the Department has continued to provide creative, innovative and life changing programs to the young residents of our City.

Summer employment programs, teen centers, swimming, skating, boxing, karate, and fitness programs have all provided healthy, constructive and wonderfully productive activities that have enriched the lives of thousands of children and young adults, keeping many of them out of harm’s way and providing them with guidance that has without question changed and improved their lives.

There is no question that these programs have strengthened families, neighborhoods and our City as a whole.

And there is no question that the Department is a model for working in partnership with diverse segments of the community, all in an effort to enrich and further develop the lives of our young people.

As an example, our Truancy Abatement Program is a multi-agency and family centered program designed to combat truancy and reduce juvenile crime rates. The program has had a dramatic impact on reducing truancy and continues to be an award-winning national model.

Similarly, the Youth Service Navigation System, is an innovative program designed to create a universal access point for all young people in the City and County to guide them toward

becoming more self-sufficient in the community, and to show them how to gain the skills they need.

All of these programs, including our Albany Online Digital Literacy Program, our Gang Prevention Program, our YouthBuild Program, and our After School Zone Program, and our many sports and recreation programs, have dramatically affected and improved the lives of our most vulnerable residents.

We are fortunate to have the dedicated staff and volunteers who make these programs national models. For all you have done to improve the quality of life of our children and our City – we thank you.

I've used the term building a smarter city strategically tonight, not only to illustrate that we've had to think creatively, often outside of the proverbial box, in order to deliver high quality services to our citizens, but because I believe Albany can use the concept of a

smarter city to become a model environment for the young members of our community.

We have all of the ingredients to give our children the benefit of living in a smart community – a community that can help them thrive in a 21st Century world.

We have a highly educated citizenry; we have some of the finest institutions of higher learning in the Country; we have cutting edge industries and technologies. And we have a supportive citizenry.

We need to put all of these ingredients to work for our young residents.

Let's begin by having schools worthy of our children. That is why I've proposed a new high school for the City – a place where these great institutions, institutions like SUNY Albany, the College

of Saint Rose, the colleges and schools at University Heights, the Center for Technology in Government, Albany Nanotech and their partners such as IBM, International Sematech, Tokyo Electron, SONY and AMD among many others – can come together and bring their expertise to a learning environment dedicated to the pursuit of excellence for our children.

Just imagine – with that kind of involvement we could have one of the finest high schools in the world. Imagine what that would mean for our children. Imagine what that would mean for our City. Imagine what that would mean for our State.

Certainly it's a lofty goal. But it is a goal worthy of a great Capital City. So tonight, I am pleased to announce that President Mark Sullivan and President George Philip have agreed to chair a committee focused on exploring the creation of such a school. Let's build a facility that the rest of our Nation will envy. If we

accomplish this, then we truly will have the right to say we are a smarter Albany.

Earlier this week, we celebrated the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In his speech accepting the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize, Dr. King said, “I have the audacity to believe that people everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits.”

In that same speech, he told us that he still believed in “... a time when men and women will know and children will be taught that we have a finer land, a better people, a more noble civilization.”

In that spirit, and in his honor - let’s embrace that audacity - let’s have the audacity to build a better and smarter city – one where our children can have the highest quality of life, and the best education possible, in the safest, most secure, most innovative, most

supportive, and most loving community in the Nation. That is my New Year wish for our City, and I am confident that working together we can make that wish come true.

In closing, I want to thank all of you for what you do to improve the quality of lives of the residents of our City. It's not always easy, but we owe it to our community and to our children to give it our greatest effort.

So may God bless you all and may God bless the people of our great City.