



Steven T. Noble  
Mayor

## **2023 State of the City Unite to Heal, Grow and Thrive January 10, 2023**

Good evening. Thank you all for being here. Thank you to the Common Council and the Council President for the opportunity to speak with you all this evening. I'm excited to welcome in this new year and to continue our work together to reach our common goals.

As we embark on a new year, it's important to look back to reflect on our challenges as well as our accomplishments. This was a busy year for the City of Kingston. We have made considerable progress in the areas of housing, sustainability, and infrastructure. We achieved some years-in-the-making goals, and I'll get to those, but I do want to talk for a moment about the challenges we faced along the way.

One of my idols has always been John F. Kennedy. Not just because he was the 35<sup>th</sup> President of the United States and I happen to be the 35<sup>th</sup> Mayor of Kingston, but because of his character. And because of his ability to evoke in each American a sense of duty to their country and to their community.

President Kennedy said, "If not us, who? If not now, when?" This call to action was first used over 2000 years ago in ancient Babylon, and more recently by President Obama, and I believe it is as relevant today as it was two millennia ago.

### **HEALING**

As we all well know, the pandemic has left lingering effects: from supply chain shortages to rapid and steep inflation, to mental health issues on a level we've not seen before. We may continue to see these and other aftershocks for months and years to come.

But the resilience of the people who live and work in our community, who have been willing to step up and help one another, has been deeply heartening. The people of Kingston have delivered meals, provided diapers and formula, advocated for more housing, lifted up the voices of others before their own, and have supported their fellow neighbors in countless ways.

Our Director of Health and Wellness was an early founder of the Kingston Emergency Food Collaborative, which - at the height of the pandemic - was delivering hundreds of meals a week and continues on a smaller scale today. Her office expanded in 2022, allowing her to continue to support the Collaborative and other local food providers. Each day she and her team work toward food sovereignty so that every resident has abundant access to healthy food.

When the February ice storm knocked out power for 47,000 Ulster County residents during frigid temperatures, they were forced to take shelter at the Andy Murphy Neighborhood Center. The City's own Director of IT volunteered with the Red Cross and spent the night at the rec

center, helping the team to house and feed the displaced. Many hands worked together to make sure our neighbors were warm and that we had no loss of life.

Just before Christmas, one of our Parks & Recreation employees awoke in the middle of the night and saw a fire engulfing his neighbor's home. Without hesitation, after calling 911, he and his wife ran over and began pounding on the doors and windows to alert the family inside. Placing themselves in danger, he and his wife were able to save multiple lives that night.

These examples remind me that, although our nation is divided politically and ideologically, *locally* - here on the community level - we are working together to meet the basic needs of each other.

In 2022, a brand-new state-of-the-art hospital opened in Kingston. In order to heal, a community must have access to healthcare, and we are proud of this \$100 million investment in our community's well-being.

Together we are healing, and we are helping others to heal.

## **GROWING**

In 2016, I gave my first State of the City address. In that address I said, "I believe the greatest resource our city has is its people. Within Kingston lies a community, one which wants to be engaged and one which has shown time and time again, when our community mourns, we mourn together, when our community thrives, we all thrive." I am happy to report that in the seven years since I shared those sentiments, I have seen firsthand that our greatest resource is our people!

And whether we are comfortable with it or not, Kingston is growing. We have experienced an influx of newcomers in the last few years. Since the beginning of my first term in 2016, my administration has been working to make Kingston welcoming and inclusive. These qualities made Kingston appealing to those seeking to relocate before, during, and after the pandemic. These new residents are now our friends and neighbors. They shop and dine and volunteer; they go to school and attend church. No matter where we started, we are all part of the fabric of this community.

To accommodate this growth, we must make sure that we are conserving our natural resources, transforming our historic and industrial assets into vibrant places to work and live, and growing in a smart and sustainable way.

## **Zoning**

One of our biggest opportunities for growth is the zoning code update. Our existing zoning code has not been updated since the 1960s. We live in a very different time from when this code was enacted. Our outdated zoning code has caused confusion, frustration, litigation, red-lining, and arbitrary regulation. With the new form-based structure, the code will be easier to understand and use, and will balance our goals for preservation, equity, and sustainable growth. It will better meet the needs of a walkable, neighborhood-oriented city.

This year, under this new code, we expect exciting redevelopment projects to take shape, including the Barrel Factory, which will be converted to artist live/work spaces in Midtown along with the potential for 100 new housing units. The old King's Inn site will be re-developed into a new multi-use housing and retail space at the center of Broadway that could provide almost 60 housing units. The former jail site has been re-envisioned as workforce and senior housing and will create 160 new housing units.

This week, the City will finalize the redistricting process, based on the 2020 Census data. With the help of professional mappers, the Council has been redrawing the wards to accommodate for population changes. With one of the options - Plan C - I believe we have the opportunity to make our City more equitable, diverse, and more inclusive through this new ward map; so please, you can put me down as a fan of Plan C.

Growth is challenging. It requires cooperation and compromise. The alternative is stagnation, and that is not acceptable. Kingston is at a point in time where change is inevitable. Our possibilities are endless. Our challenges may loom large, but I firmly believe that this is our moment. To achieve the great potential we see in our future, we must unite to **heal, grow, and thrive** in the days, months, and years ahead.

Yet, as we know, not all of us embrace change as easily as others. Some are reluctant to take leaps forward. Some prefer to sit on properties, leaving them vacant rather than putting them to good use for the benefit of our community and economy. The many lawsuits and bad faith actions thrown our way have been intended to exhaust the time of City employees, waste taxpayer dollars, and impede our ability to grow. And yet, we saw dozens of new small businesses open across Kingston last year. These are community members working to provide goods and services, who are creating jobs, who are revitalizing our neighborhoods, who are creating vibrant storefronts in our business districts. They are investing in Kingston because they believe in Kingston. This is the energy and effort we need to make Kingston a successful city.

We, as a City, also must invest in ourselves, and that is exactly what we did in 2022.

## **THRIVING**

Last year, we added two positions to the Engineering Department, and since then have been able to move projects forward that were unable to proceed before.

We completed the Franklin Street Complete Streets Project, which makes a busy thoroughfare to the elementary school, the library, and to the Hodge Center safer for everyone, especially school children. We reconstructed three public parking lots in Midtown for better accessibility, built responsibly with green infrastructure practices that help reduce storm runoff into our local waterways. This year, we finished the repairs to the Elmendorf Street Bridge and reopened this important passageway.

What better representation of the vitality, investment, and growth of our City than the Broadway Streetscape Project, a years-in-the-planning project that came to beautiful fruition last year. The vision to “build a better Broadway” began many years ago, and, after thoughtful strategic planning, a vibrant streetscape was born.

All of this investment and revitalization in Midtown, particularly in Ward 4, I hope will support our businesses, community organizations, and residents and help them thrive well into the future.

## **Infrastructure**

One of the first things I learned as Mayor was that there’s no Democratic or Republican way to fix a pothole. A pothole is a pothole, and everyone wants them fixed *today*. The job of a Mayor is to work for everyone in the community regardless of political affiliation.

Last year, the Department of Public Works filled many, many potholes. DPW laid nearly 16,000 tons of blacktop, encompassing 25 streets and about 9 miles of roadway across the City.

This year, we are committing over a million dollars in accessibility improvements to install 136 ADA-compliant corner ramps across the City. DPW will also be improving the sidewalks at the Uptown parking lots on North Front Street to better service residents and visitors.

This year, the City will move forward with the \$800,000+ Sterling Street sewer repair and replacement project and will finalize plans for multiple Midtown sewers. Once these costly sewer projects are completed, the streets above can then be paved and further improved to enhance the quality of life for our Midtown residents.

This year, we will begin construction on the Henry Street Complete Streets Project, another streetscape initiative along a well-traveled route that is especially important to young students headed to and from George Washington Elementary.

At the end of 2022, we experienced yet another reminder of how vulnerable our waterfront areas are to sea level rise and tidal flooding. The City has put in place a coordinated Riverfront flooding response plan, which went into swift effect during the last event. We were able to take preventive measures to protect City property, neighbors, and local businesses, but we also know these occurrences will only become more frequent. Tackling large projects, such as repairing our aging sewer system, helps us combat Climate Change on a local level.

Last year, we broke ground on a \$10 million dollar infrastructure project at our Waste Water Treatment Plant to rebuild our outfall and improve our equipment in an effort to minimize the impact to the Rondout Creek. We expect that project to be completed this year.

On our Downtown waterfront, we have plans for infrastructure improvements, including electrical upgrades at TR Gallo Park and repair and replacement of the city dock system.

We will begin the design of Kingston Point Park Phase 2, a project that will address persistent flooding at Kingston Point. All of this work continues to Weave our Waterfront, improving access, safety, and resiliency.

We have to mend these roads, repair these 100-year-old pipes, and replace outdated facilities in order to prosper. Though it may not be glamorous, these investments in our vital infrastructure keep a community strong enough to grow, and healthy enough to thrive.

## **Parks**

The outdoors have played a big part in our healing process. We are so fortunate to be living at the foot of the Catskills, next to the majestic Hudson River, along the Rondout and Esopus Creeks, and to have so many beautiful public parks across Kingston.

In 2022, the first State Park in the City of Kingston was officially opened. Sojourner Truth State Park connects to the Hudson River Brickyard Trail, the Empire State Trail, and the Kingston Greenline, and has incredible views of the Hudson. This park will continue to evolve over the next few years and will not only serve as an economic driver for our community but will be a beloved natural asset for generations. I thank Scenic Hudson for their stewardship of the land, and NY State Parks for creating an oasis here in our backyard.

Our Kingston Parks & Recreation Department has been a refuge for many these last few years and for decades prior. We have continued to invest in staffing and equipment in the department and it shows. In addition to the hundreds of children served by Parks' programs, the dozens of

sports leagues, and the wonderful community events, we were also able to build a new shade structure at Van Buren Park, a brand-new playground at Kingston Point Beach, our first-ever youth soccer field, and an environmentally sound parking lot at Kingston Point Park, using green infrastructure. We installed a 49kW solar panel array on the Andy Murphy Center, which will produce enough electricity to power the entire building.

In 2023, due to the rising popularity of pickleball, we will be investing in new pickleball courts at Loughran Park, as well as making sure we have free wi-fi and safety cameras at all our parks.

On the sustainability front, we will be implementing a city-wide electric bike share program. We will be solarizing additional parks facilities. We will begin a \$3.25 million investment in heating, cooling, and energy efficiency upgrades to the Andy Murphy Center and City Hall, divesting from fossil fuels. This year our Community Choice Aggregation Program, *Kingston Community Energy*, will launch, advancing the City toward energy independence and resilience. We will also hopefully adopt a Community Preservation Plan, a roadmap for ensuring our most precious land—historically, culturally, and environmentally—is protected for the future.

And I'm pleased to announce that our Sustainability and Sanitation teams will launch Phase 1 of our Citywide Organics Diversion Program. Starting this year, we will be offering 12 drop-off locations for composting across the City, reducing our waste stream heading to the landfill and saving taxpayer dollars.

### **Dietz Stadium**

One of our most popular city amenities is the Dietz Stadium complex. I am proud to be committing to a once-in-a-generation investment in Dietz Stadium with our partners at the Kingston City School District, which will get underway in earnest this year. Dietz is a true treasure to our community. The stadium hosts student athletics and Stockade FC soccer matches. Each day there are phys ed classes, boot camps, and countless runners who use the track. It's a gathering place, and it's time that we reinvest in this community asset. The Dietz Stadium Improvements Project will invest over \$20 million into upgrades that will transform the complex into a regional draw, a modernized facility that will be the pride of Kingston.

Though Dietz will be closed while this transformation takes place, we know the result will be well worth it. And, I can announce today, we will be converting an underutilized softball field at Hasbrouck Park into our first adult grass soccer field to meet a growing need here in Kingston.

In 2022, we made much-needed updates to the Andretta Pool, including adding a popular splash pad. This year, the pool will open for the summer with a major million-dollar upgrade to the pool house. I can't wait for the public to see this beautiful new facility, and I am excited to announce that the Andretta Pool will be free to Kingston residents again this summer.

### **Technology**

When writing this speech, I asked my 12-year-old son, "Matthew, in the technology section, what should I say?" He said, "Dad, nobody uses the word technology anymore, like it's the future. It's just normal life." Well, this year, we have plans to improve our "normal life."

This year, for the first time, Kingston will have a broadband competitor to Spectrum that will bring cost savings and new opportunities to our residents. I would like to welcome Archtop Fiber to I-Park 87 and look forward to your investment here in Kingston.

This year, the City of Kingston's website will have a new look and will be much easier to navigate. Let me repeat that: we are getting a new website for the City of Kingston. I think this will be very welcome news to anyone who has visited our site.

I'm happy to report that our Building Safety department has launched an online permitting website, which will streamline the process of getting a permit to improve your home or property. The Building Safety department processed an astonishing 2,250 permits in 2022. The volume of building permits illustrates the incredible investment being made in our housing stock and commercial buildings. When I first took office, we had around 600 permits a year issued!

## **Housing**

Nearly every community has been affected by housing issues. There's a serious housing shortage in our country, and Kingston has been an extreme example. Even before the pandemic, I recognized that we needed more housing at every level and recognized the urgent need to protect Kingston's tenants.

In 2022, we passed the Good Cause Eviction law helping to protect our tenants from unfair evictions. Last year, we declared a Housing Emergency in the City of Kingston. We opted into the Emergency Tenant Protection Act and put in place additional protections for our tenants, the first community to do so in upstate NY. We also put into place short term rental regulations. We offered a free landlord-tenant mediation program with our colleagues at the Dispute Resolution Center. With RUPCO, we funded a grant program for landlords to make improvements to their properties to benefit current tenants.

In 2023, we will continue these housing efforts and more. We will be providing free legal counsel with a new Right to Counsel program. We will be re-launching a Landlord Ambassador Program, which will provide incentives to landlords to keep rents affordable in exchange for grant funds for essential repairs. We will continue to ensure that vacant City-owned properties are used to create new housing units, which includes close collaboration with RUPCO and the Kingston City Land Bank to create opportunities for affordable homeownership. And we will launch a new permanent housing trust fund to further encourage affordable housing development.

I am keenly aware of the housing shortage in Kingston, and we are working with every tool and resource possible to help our residents.

## **ARPA**

It's not every day that the Federal Government writes your City a \$17 million check and says, "do something good with it." That's exactly what happened with the American Rescue Plan Act funding, and I cannot wait to get these resources out into the community. The first wave of ARPA initiatives will get underway *this month*.

We will be launching our business grants, which will be providing up to \$10,000 to Kingston businesses. With \$1 million available, we are excited to award 100 grants to our local small businesses! In the first quarter, we will also be unveiling the process for local nonprofits to apply for recovery grants. We are a City of special events, and, for the first time, I am excited to be able to financially support this economic engine for Kingston. This month, we will also launch a special event grants program to assist dozens of organizations and events this year!

## **Emergency Services**

Last year, we added more police officers to the Kingston Police Department and doubled down on our community policing efforts. In addition to walking beats, eleven officers completed the Bike Patrol School and logged 380 hours on bikes. Our investment in public safety has paid off, and, because of a partnership with the Ulster County Sheriff's office and the Oracle team, we have been able to help reduce opioid deaths.

I applaud the Kingston Police Department for their community policing efforts and commend their commitment to strengthening their relations with the Kingston community. As the Kingston Police Department continues their efforts to curb crime, we have also added a dedicated in-house Crime Analyst to the KPD team.

Last year, as part of our Head's Up Kingston traffic safety campaign, the Police Department worked closely with other City departments to educate the public on traffic rules and how to navigate the new pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure. This year, officers will be not only educating drivers, but enforcing these rules, which were established to make us all safer and help protect cyclists and pedestrians from injury.

This has never been more important. We lost a pedestrian and a bicyclist in the space of just two weeks to motor vehicle crashes. I cannot find the words to express how deeply saddened I am for these tragic losses, and I wish to express my condolences to their families. I also cannot overstate how important transportation safety is to my administration. We will double down in our ongoing efforts to ensure that all users of our roadways and sidewalks can traverse safely.

Last year, the Kingston Fire Department answered 5,556 calls for service. With our expanding Parks portfolio, there are many more miles of trails and acres of recreational area that the Fire Department must access in emergency situations. With the help of grant funding, we added an all-terrain vehicle for trails and off-road areas and will be adding a rescue boat to their fleet. KFD will also receive a new Engine 3 this year.

An initiative I am very excited to launch is the first mental-health ambulance service in this state outside New York City and one of only a few in this country. We have purchased an ambulance for the Kingston Fire Department and have paired a dedicated EMT firefighter with a mental-health crisis counselor to respond to emergency calls. This Mobile Mental Health model will ideally reduce the instances of law enforcement needing to arrive at a mental-health scene. I want to thank KFD, Ulster County, and our non-profit partners at Access for their work on this critically important initiative.

## **UNITING**

Though we have been through our fair share of challenges, we are thriving in the City of Kingston. The state of our City is resilient, and it is strong.

We are a city of 24,000 residents. With smart fiscal planning, strong budgetary restraint, and with a current grants portfolio of a whopping \$56 million, we are able to heal, to grow, to thrive.

When I came into office, the City was managing just under \$10 million in grants. Since then, the City of Kingston has received over \$81 million in additional grant funding. Because of our successful grant writing, smart fiscal planning, and partnership with the Common Council, we have been able to reduce the tax levy to a level not seen since before my administration, in 2015.

The Office of Grants Management is a prime example of how, when City departments work together, partner with local organizations, and collaborate with other municipalities, we can get

so much accomplished. We are reaching our goals, completing our projects, and bettering Kingston each day, and we are doing all of this without raising taxes. And that is one issue I think we can all “unite” on!

My hope for 2023 is that we will strive for unity. That we can come together and continue our healing. Healing from the pandemic, from the political turmoil in our country, and healing from a period of isolation. I believe it’s time that we unify to move our City forward. To ensure that Kingston is growing in a way that is smarter, more sustainable, more equitable, and with the entire community in mind. We are all, in the end, Kingstonians.

In 2004, on the campus of Syracuse University, I had the opportunity to see the great Maya Angelou speak. Her words and actions, which have left an enduring mark on our world, also had a profound effect on me that day. But these words ring even more true today, she said:

“Each one of us has lived through some devastation, some loneliness, some weather superstorm or spiritual superstorm, when we look at each other we must say, I understand. I understand how you feel because I have been there myself. We must support each other and empathize with each other because each of us is more alike than we are unlike.”

The people of Kingston are more alike than we are different. We share so many of the same values and hopes for the future. We all share a duty to one another.

As we move forward into 2023, and as we aim to **heal**, **grow**, and **thrive**, we must support one another and truly work together to further our community.