

**Majority Leader Speech**  
**Kingston Common Council**  
**Reynolds J. Scott-Childress**  
**February 5, 2019**

We used to do things differently here in Kingston. A hundred and seventy years ago, Kingstonians from different lands did not always get along well with one another. Nathaniel Booth recorded in his diary in 1849 a fight among men of different races. An Irishman insulted a Dutchman, who then knocked down the Irishman. The Irishman yelled for help from some nearby countrymen and the Dutchman “got well hammered.” Refusing to let it go, the Dutchman rounded up some of his countrymen to get revenge on the Irishman who by this time had, according to Booth, “increased his force with several Germans who entered into the spirit of the contest.”

A few years later, on Election Day 1853, as Booth recalled, a gang of native-born Americans known as the Bumble Bees battled the immigrant boys from Tipperary to prevent their candidate from winning office.

Fortunately the racial chauvinism of the Bumble Bees and the tribal conflicts of the Irish, Dutch, and Germans are things of the past here in Kingston. We no longer fight it out in the streets. We are now a cosmopolitan city with neighbors from all parts of the United States and from all around the world—from Italy and Guinea, from Iceland and Venezuela, from Australia, Cambodia, Cuba, China, Israel, Mexico, Morocco, Honduras, and more besides. Despite these different origins we have one thing in common: Now we are all members of one Kingston.

We the current members of the Common Council represent one Kingston. And let me tell you just a few of the amazing things that one Kingston has accomplished in the past year.

- Funding outside of tax revenues and City fees.
  - We won the \$10 million DRI award from New York State;

- We are managing over \$30 million in major grants for infrastructure and quality of life improvements
- Economic Development
  - We established the Kingston Land Bank to efficiently return delinquent properties to the tax roles and foster a fair-housing policy.
  - We are benefitting from hundreds of millions of dollars in new development.
- Quality of Life
  - We added a new park in Midtown at no cost to City tax payers;
  - The renovation of the wiring, plumbing, and amenities in Yosmine Towers and the Governor Clinton is going well.
    - This project is a successful use of a PILOT agreement to ensure we take care of our seniors, especially those who are on a fixed income.
  - The new alternate-side-of-the-street rules during snow emergencies have greatly improved the snow-removal process.
  - We obtained \$30,000 in CDBG funding for renovating the 1873 Burger-Matthews house in Midtown to house an African-American cultural museum, and education and community center.
  - We received significant grant funding to install new bulkheads on the Rondout Creek to protect the shoreline and encourage development of the waterfront. Tourism and revenue will benefit greatly.
- The Forsyth Nature Center drew over 50,000 visits from throughout New York State and the northeast
- Kingston Point BMX hosted 28 races, drawing 4500 visitors from nine states and Canada

I emphasize, this is only a partial list of the City's 2018 accomplishments.

The Common Council worked closely with the Mayor to keep the City's fiscal house in order.

We have succeeded in number of areas:

- We reduced your tax rates across the board for the third year in a row;
- We achieved these reductions while maintaining City services.

- We kept City spending at the same level it's been at for the past three years;
- We passed New York State's fiscal stress test with flying colors;
- We invested in much-needed infrastructure repair and renovation, which includes such major ongoing projects as
  - storm water management along the Tannery Brook;
  - sewer replacements at Greenkill Avenue, Hasbrouck Avenue, Jacob's Valley, Westbrook Lane, and Twaalfskill;
  - remediation of the serious longtime water drainage issues on 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Avenues;
  - improvements at the Waste Water Treatment Plant.

Petitioning elected officials is a time-honored democratic practice. The founders of our nation often protested actions of the British King and Parliament through petitions and memorializing resolutions. This past year the Common Council passed three significant resolutions:

1. against illegal firearm violence;
2. against the Coast Guard allowing the storage of huge oil tankers along Kingston's beautiful Hudson River shore;
3. in favor of the New York Health Act which would make quality, affordable health care available to all New Yorkers.

While these resolutions do not have the force of law or policy, they demonstrate our resolve to make Kingston a safe, healthy, and rewarding place for all its hard-working residents.

The Common Council is of course only part of a much larger engine of City service.

We have 299 full time workers, down from 356 a decade ago, and two score part-time workers who deserve our gratitude for all the effort they put in to making this a great and getting greater City. Our City workers often go unheralded. I'd like to correct that oversight by detailing, for example, the labor of our Department of Public Works.

DPW has done an amazing amount of work over the past year. Here's just a partial list:

- Paved 13 streets with 6,680 tons of blacktop.
- Cleaned out and repaired over 200 catch basins and repaired 78 manholes.
- Cleaned out 25 miles of storm and sewer pipes.
- Repaired sink holes on Staples and Henry Streets;
- Not to mention that they show up every week to take away our trash and recyclables.

Let me give you an example of the dedication brought to this work, particularly under the leadership of the new head of the Department, Ed Norman. A rupture occurred in the Greenkill Avenue sanitary sewer line and it looked like the street would have to be closed for months until the line could be replaced. But instead of waiting, Ed and Deputy DPW head Ryan Coon rolled up their sleeves, led DPW employees to dig into the muck and mire, and complete a temporary repair. They re-opened the street within a few weeks, made it passable until the work begins to finish the permanent replacement, and they saved the City thousands upon thousands of dollars.

So the next time you hear someone complaining about City workers standing around doing nothing, please ask them to look again. Remind them of the dedicated workers we have, the workers who are doing more with less, the workers who show up day in and day out to take care of all of us. Let's thank them for the work they do on the salaries that are never enough.

I'd like to thank the many volunteers who have contributed their time, energy, and wisdom to the City's Boards and Commissions.

- We have more than twenty boards and commissions with over 150 Kingston residents who volunteer their time to serve.

And I'd like to thank small sample of the citizens of Kingston who do so much to make this a wonderful place to live:

- Frank Waters and Tyrone Wilson for all the spirited work they do with Harambee.
- Diana Lopez of Nobody Leaves Mid Hudson for her community engagement.
- Katy Kondrat for maintaining the wonderful uptown farmers' market.
- Bill Cloonan for watching over Academy Green Park.
- Rebecca Martin whose work has been instrumental in protecting our water and air.

- Jordan Scruggs for all her efforts to assist the disenfranchised, from sponsoring numerous community meetings to starting a community garden on Liberty Street that is open to all residents and teaches the values of healthy eating, planting and gardening.

If many Kingston residents are unaware of the day-to-day work of our City employees and volunteers, they are also likely unaware of all the effort the hard-working members of the Common Council, the fine folks sitting behind me, commit to constituents week in and week out.

First there are the monthly meetings of the Common Council which all of us attend. Then there are the four Common Council committee meetings each month. Then each of us is assigned as liaisons to three or four boards or commissions. Then there are the gatherings with advocacy groups, ward meetings, neighborhood get-togethers, individual constituent discussions, and more. These can easily add up to over a hundred meetings a year. This is not counting the scores and scores of communications we get via email, text, and phone.

Then there is the question of process—how we discuss issues and examine them to make the often difficult decisions about what is best for the City. Let me give you two examples, the Municipal ID Law and the question of salaries for elected officials.

When an advocacy group approached members of the Common Council with the idea of implementing a Municipal ID law, we looked at it closely. The group presented the law rather narrowly as a way to assist undocumented immigrants. But we asked, who else could such a law help? What might be the wider benefits? We researched ID laws and found that New Haven Connecticut had reduced crime by 20 percent due to one. We found that abused women, homeless persons, and seniors on fixed incomes had benefited from them. We saw that local residents could benefit from them by accessing City services at residential rates. And we found that Municipal IDs had been used to boost local economies through discounts offered by local retailers. We are proud of this law because we did our due diligence, and will now be able to provide *every City resident* an opportunity to obtain a low-cost official City of Kingston I.D., regardless of race, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability,

immigration status, housing, financial status. The City of Kingston prides itself on being a welcoming and inclusive city. This program is proof positive that we are one Kingston.

### *Salary Increases*

In my experience, elected officials do not like to talk about pay raises for elected officials. So when the mayor took on the tough subject of raising the salary for his office, we experienced conflicting ways to see the issue. Should we look at it as a budget item? As a raise for this particular mayor? As a question of attracting qualified applicants to the job? All of these or something else? As we discussed it, we realized there were two main issues. It was a question of the City budget versus what would be good policy for pay raises for future elected officials. What at first looked like a difficult question of whether and how to pay for a salary increase, soon resolved, as we discussed and researched the issue, into a question of what would be the best policy for attracting and keeping qualified elected officials in our City government. We realized that our “strong mayor” system requires the Kingston mayor to be much more than a political figurehead. He or she is in fact a city manager, responsible for a workforce of over 300 employees and a \$42 million dollar budget. We compared the current salary against that of other strong mayors and city managers and realized it came up woefully short. The salary for the mayor’s office has not been raised in more than a decade. If we want to attract good talent to run the City, then, we decided, it is incumbent upon us to pay an appropriate salary.

This led to the question of policy: How could we shield future elected officials from the difficulties of negotiating pay raises? Arguments over pay raises quickly become proxy battles over political disagreements. To avoid this, we decided to tie the raise to a neutral economic measure of the increase in the cost of living. If this formula had been in place at the time of the last raise for the office of mayor, the current salary would be at \$100,000, the very amount to which we propose to increase the mayor’s salary. This policy, derived from our careful deliberations, provides a permanent, objective, common-sense solution to the question of how and when to adjust the salary of the office of the Mayor and remove it from the vagaries of politics. This legislation will soon be proposed along with a similar bill relating to Common Council salaries.

NB how in both cases these discussions took place in public, with significant public input.

And then there are the things that our dedicated Aldermen and women do going beyond the call of their official duties.

- Rita, for example, worked overtime to get the proper signage at a constituent's driveway to prevent vehicles that kept blocking it.
- Jeffrey held the hand of an elderly constituent with Alzheimer's who had run out of the house and sat with him on the sidewalk until his wife could get help.
- Tony went out after the recent major snow storm to plow out several constituents, something he's been known to do often in the past.
- Doug maintains one of the uptown planters, which requires thrice weekly transport of water.

All of us are dedicated to this City in so many ways.

And we will need that dedication. There are a number of exciting projects on the immediate horizon. When completed they will vastly improve the City—but they will require patience as we work to complete them.

### **Future Projects on Immediate Horizon**

- We are replacing all street lights in the City with LED apparatuses, saving the City hundreds of thousands of dollars in energy costs.
- There will be four main infrastructure projects in Midtown:
  - The new I-587 roundabout (NB how Wash Ave roundabout reduced crashes by 80 percent and the new one is designed much better).
  - The better Broadway street redesign.
  - Henry Street Rehabilitation.
  - And the replacement of the Greenkill sewer line.
- The Greenline will connect Kingston for pedestrians and bikers and others east to west.
- We will be repaving some 15 streets at a cost of about \$1 million.

- Plus Central Hudson will be repaving all the areas they tore up to replace old gas lines.
- There are multiple planned sanitary sewer main repairs to rehabilitate the aging sewer infrastructure and prevent future infiltration of storm water, sand and debris from entering the treated sanitary system.

## **Future Challenges**

Looking into the future we can see definite challenges ahead.

- We must continue to properly maintain and replace infrastructure before catastrophe strikes.
- We must take care that all the good economic news we've received does not disadvantage those of us already living here. As Bruce Katz, the author of *The New Localism*, recently said, "It's better to manage growth than decline." But that doesn't mean it's easy. We must ensure that all residents of Kingston have access to decent affordable housing. To that end we are organizing a series of public hearings to discuss housing from numerous angles. We want to hear from homeowners, tenants, landlords, developers, policy advocates, and housing experts to really think long and hard about what good housing policy will be for Kingston.
- We are continuing to develop a comprehensive traffic-safety plan for the City,
- We must also talk about ways to reduce the ugly politics that often surrounds us by fostering greater community togetherness.
- We will continue to talk about the best way to organize our public transit systems.
- We also will do all in our power to keep spending at current levels and to reduce the tax rate for all as we have done over the past three years.
- And we are in the process of upgrading of Council Chambers audio system.

## **CONCLUSION**

I am deeply glad to hear the current members of Common Council remark about how collegial we are. None of the current members of the Council thinks in hyper partisan ways. We don't



think in terms of political parties winning and losing. Our aim is to think of the City holistically. After all, “there’s no Democratic or Republican way to pave a street.”

The Democrats on the Common Council may all be members of the same political party, but we do not govern as a party. We make our decisions based on listening to constituents, talking with advocacy groups, thinking through problems, and trying to imagine how our decisions will benefit the City from top to bottom. We are Kingstonians first, and it as Kingstonians that we Democrats on the Common Council look to a bright future.

We the Democrats on the Common Council have a different approach. We support the creation of new jobs, decent housing for all Kingstonians, and a better quality of life. Through smart and just development we can increase tax revenues and in turn further reduce tax rates while improving City services and quality of life. We say YES to community-based development. We say YES to robust city services. We say YES to building bridges of trust. We say YES to using City resources wisely. We say YES to welcoming all those who want to come to Kingston to work hard, be good neighbors, and join in creating a loving and peaceful place to live year in and year out.

Let us direct our hearts so that we might walk together to a brighter future for one Kingston.