

Majority Leader Speech
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We are living in a slow-motion hurricane. Battered by the gale-force winds of precarity and the rising waters of misfortune. We have suffered through the terrifying loses of the Covid crisis, felt the horrible repetition of the George Floyd killing, the inspirational response to it, the increasing partisan rancor across the nation that led to the Capitol Hill insurrection a month ago.

Clean up will be long, arduous, and potentially healing.

This is a time to reflect on the year that has been and to look forward to release and renewal. It is now time for us to start saying “yes” and building toward inspiration.

For all the horrors of COVID, the City’s pluck shined through. The City funded a wide array of responses from food distribution to housing support. We have been supremely grateful for the community groups and volunteers who stepped up to achieve an amazing response to the crisis, especially the folks who came together to create Kingston Mutual Aid, who set up the blue refrigerator on Clinton Avenue, who continue the work of People’s Place, and so much more.

I would also like to send out a heartfelt appreciation to DPW for the excellent job they have done clearing our streets in the second massive snow storm of this winter season. I’m also happy to note that the City learned something from the prior snow-storm debacle: declare snow emergencies early and more folks are able to get their cars off the streets to enable DPW to get the snow cleared.

Our achievements have been numerous and significant for the City and its future.

- The Common Council weathered the transition to online meetings
- We funded \$95,000 in improvements at Rondout Neighborhood Center.
- We approved funding of over \$1,000,000 for improving City parks.
- We reduced the registration fee for taxi cab drivers.
- We worked with the Mayor and his administration to produce a positive 2021 City budget that keeps our tax levy at the same rate for the fifth year in a row which amounts to an over reduction in City taxes due to the rate of inflation.
- While we had some differences of opinion regarding the creation of certain administrative positions, we produced a good budget in the end.
- The Council Passed revisions to support the work of the Kingston Police Commission.
- We proudly authorized \$1.25 million for retroactive pay to KPD officers after the final resolution of their contract.
- We approved funding to fix the dangerous intersection at Pine Grove, Broadway, and Grand Street intersection.
- Aldermen also approved funding for replacing the failing sewers underneath Broadway in advance of the renovation of the street scape there.
- We authorized \$20,000 to support the Youth Design Project at the Pine Street African Burial Ground.

- We saved the City over two million dollars by switching from outmoded and expensive-to-replace traffic lights with more appropriate four-way stop signs.
- The Council unanimously approved the PILOT agreement to support the construction of the Kingstonian parking garage.
- And we voiced our support for the County to transform the site of the old jail on Golden Hill into a workforce-rate housing development.

We are proud of the good work we have done, but realize that, besides COVID, we face several deep-seated problems.

Housing

Providing enough homes for Kingston residents has been a perennial problem over past several decades, particularly at middle- and lower-income levels.

But we do have good news on this front: We have three major affordable housing developments just open or in the works. RUPCO's award-winning Energy Square recently opened on Cedar Street, providing over fifty apartments for low-income area families. RUPCO's Landmark Place at the old Alms House is slated to open later this year. It will provide 66 supportive and affordable units for seniors aged 55 and over. And Ulster County has undertaken the development of a 160-unit housing complex aimed at being affordable for hardworking Kingstonians.

A sound housing plan requires the development of housing for a variety of income levels. The Kingstonian development will also provide some 140 apartments, with ten percent of them reserved for affordable housing rates. The rest will be middle income, market rate units. This project fits in the context of the three affordable housing developments mentioned above. Moreover, this project aligns some of the core principles of environmental sustainability: development on previously developed land; fostering of urban density; encouraging walkability; and proximity to a major transportation hub, the Kingston Bus Station.

I am happy to note the purchase of local E&M properties by Aker, as of last Friday. The principals of the firm grew up in the Hudson River Valley. Their forebears worked at IBM, taught school, and worked in the brickyards in East Kingston. Most exciting is that a significant portion of the funding was crowd sourced among some 200 area residents. Aker has pledged to significantly renovate the Kingston properties which have been poorly maintained for decades. I believe they will seek to establish rents that are affordable at workforce rates and strongly encourage the Mayor to work closely with Aker to achieve that goal.

We have introduced a proposal to establish short-term rental (STR) regulations. Currently, there are not clear rules about establishing and maintaining STR units in the City. Our aim is to protect long-term rental viability as well as community cohesion and quality of life. We want to clearly define what STRs are meant for and to keep them distinct from hotels, motels, and bed-and-breakfasts. Most importantly, we want to provide for the safety of renters with regular inspections and the requirement of adequate insurance protections.

In another area of Kingston housing we are facing a dire emergency. The COVID crisis has exacerbated our already destabilized housing market and has caused many low-income neighbors to lose their housing or to be close to it. We must act now to fix this. Fortunately, the City recently won an Enterprise grant that provides a million dollars to address the problem of housing displacement. Two of the most promising approaches for stanching our housing wound include the purchase of: tiny houses and the development of auxiliary units. Working with the

Anti-Displacement Learning Network, a City volunteer committee has researched these options and is looking for ways to make them happen soon.

Policing

In the wake of the George Floyd killing and the vast outpouring of support for the Black Lives Matter movement, communities across the country have begun to review policing practices and community values. The Common Council's Special Policing Committee worked with City residents in a months'-long project of considering how our Police Commission works and how it might be improved. A little over a year ago we passed significant legislation to do this.

In the process, we learned crucial things about our police force. Our police force is among the best trained in the United States. Unlike many departments in the area, KPD officers are required to engage in implicit bias and related trainings. KPD has already implemented procedural justice practices. We acknowledge that they have a powerfully difficult job and provide an essential service. We also acknowledge that we ask our police to do more than they ever have before and to do things that are beyond traditional policing responsibilities. Police face great strain and this is why I hope we can get the Peaceful Guardians program back in gear.

Over the past year and some the Common council has sought to provide KPD with state of the art equipment, such as the purchase of new body camera and the purchase of License Plate Readers through the New York State Power Authority. We would like to thank Julie Noble for spearheading this initiative.

Governor Cuomo responded to the debates over policing by requiring every New York State municipality to review their policing practices and to recommend possible improvements and initiatives. These Task Forces are comprised of local residents volunteering their time. Here in Kingston the Task Force was shepherded by Lester Strong—a powerfully effective man because he is simultaneously resolute and congenial and of the utmost character. We would like to thank Lester and all the members of the Task Force for their hard work.

As we consider their recommendations, we understand how vital it is to keep an open mind. Too often, the discussion of policing is falsely and unproductively reduced to two opposing sides. One calling for fewer police, the other demanding more police.

But what if we ask instead: What is it we all want? We all want the same thing: we want to feel safe in the streets and we want to feel safe in our homes. So as we consider the recommendations of the Policing Task force, let's start from the commonality. How can we all work together to create a safer Kingston?

This doesn't mean that we can easily solve our conflicts relating to safety and policing. It will requires difficult conversations. It will require respecting very different relations to the police. For example: Some folks have a long history of mistrust of the police and for good reason. Some folks have a powerful respect for the police, and for good reason. Some folks believe there are alternative routes other than traditional policing to community safety and for good reason. What we are really talking about when we talk about the police is what sort of community do we want to be?

Community

After a year in the storm, it is time for us to look ahead. This COVID hurricane will pass. The dark clouds of dread are just now starting to break. What's the new world that we want?

Do we really want a return to "normal"?

Normal is what got us here.

Normal is what got us to a wretched pandemic response.

Normal is what got us to warring sides over policing.

Normal is what got us trapped in tribal channels.

Our entire country is mired in strident disavowal. *These* folks cry that America has never been just, *those* folks declare America can do no wrong. *We* are patriots, *they* are traitors. At times it seems that the only thing we agree on is that we are doomed.

The good news is that we are more than our extremes.

But how do we bring it all together into a truly beloved community?

Local government can help, but it is not the entire answer. Local government, particularly at the level of a small city like Kingston, is mostly concerned with maintaining the basic systems for a decent life: water, sewer, streets, personal safety, property protection, preservation, environmental sustainability, trash removal, etc.

Local government is not “politicians” and distant power brokers. We are your neighbors, your friends, your family. We shouldn’t let national partisan divides dictate how we relate to one another. When I first became an alderman, a local experienced representative gave a sound piece of advice: There is, he said, no Republican or Democratic way to pave a street. It may be time to consider more cooperative forms of local governance:

Would we benefit from a city-manager form of government?

Would ranked-choice voting produce better representationality?

Would non-partisan elections lead us focus more closely on local issues rather than seeing every local election as a proxy for national party power?

It is certainly time for charter review and at least the discussion of other possibilities.

This is not a time for persistent “no.” We have all been mired in the politics of refusal and resistance for too long. It is time for a politics of “yes.” Yes to each other, yes to a community vision, yes to recognizing our differences even as we build on our commonalities.

I admit that the City needs to do a better job of communicating. It is not enough to have open meetings where often we only hear from a narrow slice of the City’s residents. We must be more intentional in inviting City residents and stake holders into conversation with one another.

Our problem over the past while has been that we’ve lurched from project to project. This can fuel conspiracy mongering and cynical visions of secret deals and bad faith everywhere. Worse, it leaves residents feeling that they have little influence and little need to commit themselves to perfecting Kingston community.

Now is the time for truly constructive conversations that require City-wide commitment and work toward better community. We already have great examples of doing community here in Kingston: for example, our annual Clean Sweep campaign. We have wonderful community-aid organizations and individuals:

- People’s Place,
- Midtown Rising,
- Gregory McCollough
- The Real Kingston Tenants’ Union,
- The Good Works Institute,
- The YMCA Farm Project,
- Harambee,
- The Boys and Girls Club
- The YMCA

But what we need over and above these is a community-developed vision.

We can develop this vision by more and more of us taking responsibility for our City, creating networks of support and care, sharing resources, learning to rely on one another, setting the foundation for trusting one another no matter which part of Kingston we come from, no matter how long we have lived here, no matter what party or religion or identities we belong to. Let us be guided by love: Not to win partisan battles but to perfect our community. Let us work toward inspiration together.