

2012 State of the City Address

The City of Ithaca municipal code dictates that the Mayor shall, at the beginning of each year, address Common Council with “respect to the needs and resources of the city, including such programs and proposals for the good of the city as he/she may wish to recommend.”

After four years on Council, seven months speaking with thousands of Ithacans directly on the campaign trail, and one month in the Mayor’s office, I am here to tell you that the State of the City of Ithaca is strong. However, in order to keep it strong we all have work to do. Together we must overcome our budgetary difficulties, grow our economy, plan for our future, protect our environment, improve our service delivery and enhance our communications.

Budgeting:

2013 will be one of the most difficult budget years in the city’s history. Navigating it will require deep thought and hard choices on the part of Common Council.

A slow economy combined with ever increasing pension and health care costs, has pushed our city to the brink. Residents have been taxed to their limit and need solutions that don’t involve dramatic increases in their property tax bill.

Over the last four years, we’ve made changes around the edges to balance our budget - most notably taking millions from our savings and not filling positions as people retired or moved on.

It is time for a more proactive approach; time to make the hard decisions that will mean pain in the short term, but will set our city up for success and fiscal prosperity in the future.

We will explore streamlined processes, shared services, retirement incentives, furloughs and negotiations with our public unions. In the end, we must get our fiscal house in order and nothing is “off the table”.

To discuss these and other issues I’ve asked Alderperson Deb Mohlenhoff to organize a strategic planning session later this month so Common Council can set their priorities. I’ve also asked Alderperson J.R. Clairborne, now a veteran of the budget process, to lead a revamped process this year.

Economic Development:

We cannot simply cut our way out of this hole. We must diversify our economy, build more housing and expand our tax base.

Our local economy is built on education, agriculture and tourism. These industries have served us well. Our community has the highest rate of

employment in New York State. As a city we will continue to support these mainstays by - among other things - fighting to protect the area from truck traffic, drilling rigs, air pollution and potential water contamination that threaten the natural environment.

The employment opportunities and continued growth of the student population have increased demand for housing. Failing to respond to this increased demand has led to high rents, high taxes and increased traffic. Recent studies by the Tompkins County Planning Department and the Downtown Ithaca Alliance document a need for thousands of new housing units countywide. We must make sure that population growth happens where it makes the most sense - in our urban core. Growth in our City will mean an expanded tax base, more customers for city-based businesses, and a higher percentage of people walking, biking and using public transit.

To guarantee prosperity and stability in the future, we must also diversify our economy. Creating more light industrial and manufacturing opportunities will provide higher paying jobs and an even more resilient economy. We'll look to the west end, downtown and the Emerson site as prime areas for redevelopment and job creation.

Emerson:
Working together to get it right

The now vacant Emerson plant and the dozens of acres of empty land present the City with tremendous opportunities amidst daunting challenges. We have an opportunity to create manufacturing jobs, install a combined heat and power plant, and add hundreds of housing units near downtown and Ithaca College. In order to achieve this vision we must remediate in-ground pollution and resolve difficulties arising from the fact that the site is split between the City and the Town.

I've already begun working to overcome these challenges and navigate the way to a brighter future. In the past month I have visited Cornell's Combined Heat and Power Plant and the Lake Source Cooling Facility along with city staff, Alderperson Cynthia Brock, and South Hill residents to learn more about what might be possible at the Emerson site.

I have also committed, along with Town Supervisor Herb Engman, to working together with the Town of Ithaca to overcome our challenges and turn the Emerson project into a success. We will be convening a joint city-town Emerson Task Force to resolve zoning, tax-revenue sharing and regulatory issues. The solutions this Task Force generates will pave the way for remediation and redevelopment.

Cornell University:
Partnering to enhance our community

Late in 2011, Mayor Carolyn Peterson sent a letter to Cornell University President David Skorton requesting an increased monetary contribution to our budget. The Mayor - and the city - was rebuffed.

Still we must persist. Cornell University's success is inextricably linked to the success of the City of Ithaca. We must make it clear that if the University does not increase their investment in our economy, our mutual success is in danger.

Inspired by Mayor Bloomberg's initiative in New York City that turned a \$100 million investment by that city into a \$2 billion return from Cornell and Israel's Technion Institute, I have asked the City of Ithaca's economic development staff to develop our own proposal. Our goal: deliver to the upper administration at Cornell University a project that will fill a need of theirs while contributing to the tax base and economy of the City of Ithaca. It is no small task - but I have full confidence in the creativity and competence of our staff.

Planning

We must preserve the city's history even as we plan for its future.

We are in the midst of a city-wide comprehensive planning campaign. Once completed, our Comprehensive Plan will lay the groundwork for future infrastructure investments, zoning changes and private developments.

We must ensure that dense growth happens in the urban core and along transit lines. We must mitigate the visual and traffic impacts of this density on the surrounding neighborhoods.

We must ensure that the quiet residential neighborhoods that we all value are preserved and maintained. We must ensure that our natural environment remains accessible and pristine. Most importantly, we must ensure that everyone with an opinion about the future of the City of Ithaca has their voice heard.

While we plan, we must also recognize that the City continues to change under our feet. This year we will see construction projects in Collegetown, Breckenridge Place, Cayuga Green, Seneca Way, Holiday Inn and the Argos Inn. Many of these projects will be underway while the City is replacing the Clinton Street Bridge and the State of New York is repairing Green Street and Seneca Street.

Each of these public and private investments is good individually. Taken together they mean one thing: gridlock. The City will - as much as we can - do 'air traffic control' to stagger the projects and minimize the inconvenience. Still,

given the large number of projects and the number of separate agencies involved, residents should expect delays. We will work hard to get the word out about the delays well in advance in order to help people plan their routes and avoid the construction.

Government Performance

We must institute a performance measurement system and create a Chief of Staff position to improve accountability and transparency, and enhance our public communications.

Ithacans demand a high level of service. They want an accountable, responsive and transparent government. We can give it to them by overhauling our management structure.

We cannot manage what we do not measure. A performance measurement system will give Council and the Mayor the information we need to make informed budgetary and personnel decisions. As recommended by the recently completed Novak report the City should also create a Chief of Staff position that will implement this performance measurement system. This position will also give the city departments badly needed administrative oversight and support.

Keeping the public informed continues to be a challenge. We must modernize our website so Ithacans can get the information they need without taking time away from their jobs and families to come to City Hall. We will begin broadcasting Common Council, Board of Public Works and other meetings online this year. We will also maintain an archive of videos on the website so that if you miss a meeting you can still find out what happened.

It is also time for the City to enter the world of social media. So many thousands of Ithacans are staying connected to each other and the outside world through Facebook and Twitter. These tools will allow us to inform people about routine matters like meetings, announcements, events etc. and - importantly - will help us get information out more quickly in the event of a crisis.

To achieve these changes I've created a new committee, the Government Performance and Accountability (GPA) Committee, to be chaired by Alderperson Deb Mohlenhoff. They will work to create a performance measurement system, explore the creation of a Chief of Staff position, and will work to enhance our public communications.

The State of our City is strong, but its future hangs in the balance.

In order to stay healthy, vibrant and successful we will need to reduce costs, grow our economy, partner meaningfully with Cornell University, measure our performance, and improve our public communication.

I have no illusions about the scale of the work that lies before us. I know that is an ambitious and far-reaching agenda. I know too that we are up to the task. I know that Common Council, city staff, and engaged community members can achieve all I've laid out today and more. I know this because I have come to learn what this City is capable of.

We are Ithaca. We are a city that prides itself on being overeducated and over-caffeinated. We are a city that prides itself on thinking otherwise. We are a city that believes an idea can change the world.

We are Ithaca. We are a city of tree-huggers. We are a city of environmentalists. We are a city that uses the term "sustainability" so much it became a buzzword that didn't mean anything. Then we kept using it until it meant something again. We are a city that knows that the future of our economy, our community and our life depends on keeping our air, our water, and our soil clean.

We are Ithaca. We are a city of entrepreneurs. We are a city that embraces local businesses. We are a city that spawns non-profits. We are the kind of community that - when a business like Buffalo Street Books is about to shut its doors because it cannot compete with box stores and online retailers - binds together to find a creative solution and bring that business back to life.

We are Ithaca. We are a city that believes in its young people. We believe that investing in our youth is not just our responsibility. We believe it is our greatest opportunity. We are a city that has seen how yesterday's member of the Ithaca Youth Council is today's Director of Planning and Economic Development.

We are Ithaca. We are a city that believes that - given a chance - anyone can make a difference. We are a city that believes a 24 year old with a passion for public service, a willingness to work, and a love for this community, can lead the City.

We are Ithaca. And we will do this together!

Mayor Svante L. Myrick