



**2018 State of the City
Salvatore J. Panto, Jr.
Mayor**

At my Inaugural ten years ago I stated “We have a mandate to govern and to make the changes that are essential for Easton to become the city we all know it could and should be.”

Today, few people remember the city we inherited. A city on the verge of bankruptcy; a city in the early intervention plan of Act 47 (state take-over); a city rampant with violence, drugs, gangs; a triple homicide three weeks before I took office; paying back a \$5 million lawsuit for a horrific death of one of our police officers and a defunct project in which we inherited \$1.35 million of debt for subsidizing a private. Families were leaving; businesses were leaving and investors had no confidence in a city that raised its taxes every year.

In spite of all that, and the worst recession since the great Depression, we have maintained the tax rate level as we have for the last TEN years; we’ve also added 11 more police officers; we encouraged more than \$700 million in public and private development and we are taking back and rebuilding our neighborhoods with additional code officers; we also brought our fire department up to full staffing; all without a real estate tax increase. For the first time in 5 decades our population is increasing. Today because of our work together – the state of our City is stronger than it’s been in the last 5 decades and ladies and gentlemen, that is a really good feeling.

The easiest thing for a public official to do is nothing. No mistakes, no complaints. No challenges to your decisions. But that’s like a rocking chair – it gives you something to do but you don’t get anywhere.

Christopher Columbus said “You can never cross the ocean until you have the courage to lose sight of the shore.” Our Administration and Council has the courage to take the chances and make the tough decisions to make our city better. And our fervor and commitment is no less than it was 10 years ago--- and we will not rest on our accomplishments. There is still much to do.

The State of the City is an opportunity to celebrate and challenge. Every day I get to see the amazing work being in every part of our community. And my renewed commitment each year is certainly not because I’ve won every policy

debate. It's not because I've avoided the hard choices in an effort to be liked all the time. It's the people, and getting to see everyday what we are capable of - that is the source of my faith in our city and our potential. The bottom line is, we have the best people in our city. I am also fortunate that I have surrounded myself inside and outside of City Hall with qualified and dedicated individuals of good character and integrity. I constantly hear positive comments about our city from individuals who are new to town and I hear it from families who have waded through the troubled waters of the past. I know you do too.

After ten years I can still report that our finances are better than they have been in decades; we not only secured Easton's first A+ bond rating, we also sustained again this past year by S&P. We are seeing major new investments in our downtown and our neighborhoods. We are moving rapidly to dramatically improve our public infrastructure, *not glitzy but necessary*. Tough choices and prudent planning over the past decade have allowed us to achieve that stability. We have stopped kicking the costs down the road to our kids and grandchildren.

Our finance reserves are not only positive every year but they continue to grow. Most importantly, we have provided vital services by becoming more efficient and using technology.

Our A+ bond rating is a testament to our financial strength and helps save thousands of dollars in interest expense when selling bonds to finance capital projects like our new fire pumper or new police station.

Following sustained decreases in crime over the last decade, last year we experienced a small increase in crime of 0.94% going from 2,221 to 2,241 incidents of reported crimes. UCR Part I crime increased by 1.98% driven primarily by increases in Theft. Although we don't like to talk about it -- there were no homicides in our city last year and this is the second year without a homicide in the West Ward.

After a 10- year process we were able to site and build the new state of the art Police headquarters. It is estimated that using the design/build method we saved taxpayers over \$2 million. We also received a grant for a new virtual training system. This "TI" system has been shown to be the most effective in law enforcement and offers officers over 600 interactive training scenarios.

Last year we also sponsored a trial program expanding the Ambassadors into the West Ward area of the city. This trial period showed extremely positive results and was met with overwhelming support by the citizens in the neighborhood and I am happy to report the program was adopted and implemented full time this year in cooperation with GEDP and future expansions are possible.

Parking meters are a necessary evil but we are using technology to make it convenient. All of our meters now accept credit and debit cards. We implemented the MobileNow app for the most convenient method of parking.

The Police Department has continued its commitment of getting officers out of the vehicles and on foot. The increased number of foot and bike patrols last year had a huge, positive impact.

Yes crime is up less than 1% but violent crime down by 9%, property crime down by 16%, and, just as important, arrests are down 25% since 2014. We are making Easton safer by using drug raids to get the violent people and guns off our streets. Already this year our Police Department has conducted 12 drug raids which has taken the violent people off of our streets.

This past year the fire department put into service new equipment utilizing grants. A federal grant funded 35 brand new state of the art self contained breathing apparatus. Lafayette College is paying for a custom fire rescue pumper at a cost of more than \$570,000. Federal dollars also funded a fire service utility vehicle to be used on the city's trail system and growing number of special events.

In 2017 our fire department responded to 1,815 (9% increase) fire emergency calls, 302 (12% increase) emergency medical calls and 657 non-emergency activities. In addition, our department members participated in 130 training classes, totaling over 2,300 staff hours.

The Fire Department prides itself on quick and safe response times to all incidents. 12 million dollars of property was at risk due to fire and only \$1.3million was lost, and thankfully, no lives saving just over 88%. Our firefighters conducted fire prevention education for 2,957 children and 1,033 adults.

With our revitalization we have seen significant increases in construction activity with permit applications increasing from 2015 to 2017 by over 40%.

There are still sub-standard building conditions and quality of life issues that need attention. In an effort to mitigate these conditions and their effects on the community, 2,092 code cases opened, resulting in 3,174 inspections, meetings, or hearings. This resulted in 103 Violation Tickets issued, and 523 citations filed with the three District Magistrates.

The department also performed 980 Buyer Notification Inspections, an increase of 266 inspections from 2016, or an increase of more than 37%. The real estate market in Easton is strong.

The main objective the Rental Inspection program is improving the quality of properties throughout the city to ensure that landlords are being responsible to the community by providing quality housing. There were 1572 rental inspections conducted in 2017.

The Bureau of Health issued 223 licenses to food facilities and there were 271 inspections to assure safety and cleanliness. There were also 354 temporary licenses and inspections issued for special events.

In December 2016 the final draft of Easton Comprehensive Plan 2035 was released by the Planning Department to City Council and adopted in 2017. The plan sets forth a collective vision and action plan to develop the City into a vibrant place to live-work-play community for its residents and visitors while being flexible to meet the needs of the future. Three Vision themes were created: **Transform; Unify, and Thrive.**

Last year the private sector developed more than 166,000 square feet at an investment of over more than \$150 million and our assessed value continues to grow.

The Planning Department is constantly updating our vacant properties and adding the worse to our Certified Blighted List. Last year twelve property owners took action to improve their properties by either applying for appropriate building permits or through a successful sale of the property.

Several important changes were made in our Planning Ordinances last year. We introduced and approved an amendment creating regulations for mini antenna facilities; minimum dwelling unit size was set at 450 square feet and an update to the College Hill/Institutional 1 Transitional Zone to provide for mixed use residential dorms as well as design standards, parking and dimensional criteria.

When the private sector doesn't want to do a project we get involved and in partnership with the Redevelopment Authority we make it happen. To date we have done more than two dozen homes throughout the city, mostly in the West Ward .

As we continue to grow our tourism economy, the Department of Community and Economic Development, and City Council approved a new marketing and promotion program that included a new city logo, tagline and brand identity which will include a new website and brochures.

Increased attention was given to the securing of grants and 11 applications were submitted. More than \$1.3 million in grants for economic development projects were received which will ultimately leveraged more than \$45 million not including

Da Vinci if that moves forward. \$300,000 in grants was received for Science City.

The largest economic development project is the possibility of having the DaVinci Science City project come to fruition. This transformational project with its STEM educational experiences has the potential to bring hundreds of thousands of visitors to our city. Together with other attractions like the Crayola Experience, State Theatre, Sigal Museum, Nurture Nature and others tourism continues to grow our economy. The Science City project will also help to prepare our young adults for the new workforce, an issue of national importance as traditional skills compete with technology skills. Our economy and the potential growth in our economy is based almost entirely on tourism and Lafayette College.

Additional projects requiring attention include the Black Diamond residential project, the recruitment of additional businesses in the city to provide needed jobs, to meet the goals of increasing the tax base, creating jobs and retaining jobs. This department has also assisted in the addition of Career Link and the Northampton Community College Education Outreach facilities in our downtown to help meet our goal of increasing the earning capacity of our residents.

The most visible and largest of the city, the Public Works department has another busy year and even busier

- Completion of Hugh Moore Park Bridge Structural Steel Repairs
- Increased road reconstruction productivity to more than 4000 tons of new blacktop installed – a 33% increase over the previous year.
- Completion of the Hugh Moore Park improvements with a state grant of more than \$750,000
- Instituted new Bureau of Recreation and Neighborhood Programs and working to develop recreational programs for all demographics, neighborhoods and various community groups.
- Accomplished more than \$2.5 million in WWTP Improvements resulting in improved levels of treatment that are more environmentally friendly and also more sustainable.
- Constructed new pedestrian crossing at Bank & Northampton Streets
- Continued to replant our urban forest and engaged numerous neighborhood and civic groups in the process

- Developed, mapped, and branded the Two Rivers Trailway System with 4 other municipal partners to connect our trails.
- Continued with improvements to City sustainability including wastewater treatment, stormwater planning, trail construction and promotion, promotion of alternative energy, car charging stations in both garages, UHaul Car Share Program, and LED street lighting throughout the city.

The IT department was very busy last year as they provided all of the IT services for the new police station saving the city a substantial amount of money. They also added WIFI to the parking decks to provide service for our outdoor events and improved our online payment options which more and more residents are using. The IT department also launched our NIXLE program which notifies residents of emergencies.

The city continues to use technology to provide more efficient services to our residents and projects for this year include:

Technology is our future and its use will allow the city to become more efficient and help us provide better services to our residents at a more economical cost.

WE are also looking for places in the neighborhoods to place kiosks like the one we have in the city hall lobby. People will be able to walk to pay their fess owed to he city.

We are also receiving many accolades and Awards from outside organizations including:

2017 Pennsylvania Downtown Center Townie Awards for Best Special Event (PA Bacon Fest)

Anchor Building (Easton Public Market) and once again our Main Street received the Top Performing Main Street program award

2017 Chamber of Commerce Commercial Real Estate Development - Adaptive Reuse Award (Easton Public Market)

2017 Preservation Pennsylvania - Public Impact Award (Easton Public Market)

Lehigh Valley Style -- 2017 Best Farmers' Market

Bon Appetit Magazine (June 28, 2017) named Easton Farmers' Market "One of 13 Farmers' Markets worth Traveling For"

I was elected to the National League of Cities Board of Directors and I am currently serving as the President of the Pennsylvania Municipal League;

Many of asked me – How are you doing it? What changed?

First I thank my private sector senior management positions. When we returned to office we created momentum. We created a positive attitude. We decreased the perceptions and the realities of the past. We realized that if we didn't define ourselves, others would do it for us. We started with the little things. We knew that we needed to make things happen, even when failure could be eminent. Yes there was the High School Sports of Fame and others that didn't come to fruition. We work on as many as 10 projects a month that never come to fruition but that doesn't deter our enthusiasm to work with 10 more the following month.

Reggie Jackson struck out twenty-six-hundred times in his career -- the most in the history of baseball. But you don't hear about the strikeouts. People remember the home runs. Babe Ruth hit 714 homeruns but struck out over 1300 times; Steve Spielberg was rejected three times by the Southern California School of Theatre, Film and Television; Michael Jordan was cut from his high school basketball team and in the NBA he missed over 9,000 shots; Bill Gates' first business was a bust; Walt Disney was fired from his job at the Kansas City Star for lacking imagination and good ideas; Thomas Edison conducted 1,000 failed experiments --- #1,001 was the light bulb.

We may fail, we all do. The world doesn't care how many times you fall down, as long as it is one less than the number of times you get back up. That's our philosophy. Are motto is simple but oh so important "We base our decisions on the long term not the political term.

I know that some Eastonians also have questions about the changes we are pursuing, as well as the pace of change. While change is inevitable no matter what we do, it is important that we manage the change in a manner that fulfills our long-held community ideals and values. But as a pragmatic preservationist my goal is to preserve our city's uniqueness and its historical assets understanding that we must also prepare and be flexible to grow for the future.

It's an exciting time in Easton's history. Our population continues to grow as word spreads that Easton is an exceptional place to live and work. Exxon employees in Clinton NJ named Easton the number one place they would like to live.

This year we look forward to several projects including completion of Phase 2 of Silk and the start of Phase 3

Easton Yards project, a vacant mill on the south side

This long vacant Heritage Lanes building will be announced later this year

We look forward to the late spring opening of Billy's Downtown Diner and several other new restaurants

Two new construction projects will start this year on Walnut Street

This former silk mill site on the south side has been vacant and blighted for many years and we received a Brownfield grant in the amount of \$153,000 toward its cleanup.

There is a lot of mis-information about this Lafayette project but without a doubt it is critical to the overall future of our city and this is the tough decisions that need to be made by local elected officials.

Our festivals have brought people from all over the region to our city and they come back on a regular basis

We are adding three new festivals this year – Larry Holmes 40th Anniversary Day on June 8th; Seniors Day on August 21st and Back to School Band Jam.

But make no mistake, we face many challenges. Several of our challenges are our goals for this year – to increase our downtown daytime economy; to increase the earning capacity of our residents; and to create and develop an affordable housing program.

Financially, our biggest challenge continues to be our pension legacy costs and the growing amount of money needed to be sustainable. I have been lobbying for change for more than 30 years. The Chamber of Commerce has been by our side. I see little appetite for the partisan state legislature to make meaningful reform.

Experts say housing will be the defining issue of the next decade for America's cities. That is true in Easton where affordable housing and the homeless are two of the most pressing issues we face. As a product of a public housing project myself, my goal is to grow our city without gentrifying our city. We will roll out an affordable housing program in 2019 to assist the working poor in achieving the American Dream of home ownership and affordable rental rates for those that choose to rent. We are also working with the private sector supporting an affordable housing project at the former Black Diamond site --- a site being developed by Mr. Tim Harrison in cooperation with Mr. John Robinson and the Pirhl Group for the working families.

Another challenge nationally and locally is the opioid crisis. Addiction is a cunning and baffling disease. More than 75% of opioid addiction starts with prescription medications. We must make the Opioid Crisis a national issue with assistance from the federal and state governments. Currently, our police, fire

and EMS units are using NARCAN an average of 20 times a month. We must treat this addiction as the disease it is and develop a comprehensive program not just of enforcement but also treatment.

We continue to work to make our city more sustainable and resilient. We are switching to LED light bulbs in streetlights and trail lights where possible and will be installing 3 more blocks of architectural street in the West Ward along Northampton St. Upgrades at the wastewater treatment facility, trail construction, electric car charging stations, and 100% of City Hall and 75% of all electricity by alternative energy.

Under federal mandate, this year we will commence our stormwater management program and this should be on City Council's desk late Spring for adoption. Although this is necessary for clean waterways it doesn't come without a cost to residents and businesses.

There is no doubt that after lobbying and working for 30 years with state agencies and the Legislature we still don't have pension reform in our state. Our pension legacy costs are now more than \$6 million a year.

Additional challenges facing our city are – crumbling and decaying infrastructure; preemption by the state and federal government that takes away our local control; the impact of technology and how we provide broadband internet access to all residents; workforce development for a new era of technology to have the skills needed as traditional employment opportunities are fading away and being replaced by high tech jobs.

Together, we've transformed Easton from a place that was packed with potential... into a City that is *realizing* its potential.

The State of our City is strong and getting better and better every day. And, it would not be possible without each of you. Thank you so much.

Thank you.