

As I present this State of the City we are a city emerging from what has been the most challenging period of our lives – a time that our grandchildren and great grandchildren will learn about in their history books. Whether personally, professionally, or otherwise, we all have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. As mayor, I can tell you, it's been a time of doubt and distress, but ultimately, one of proven resilience and courage by our city but it didn't diminish our drive to move Easton forward.

We now are coming out of that very dark place in our history with a perspective that inspires us and reignites us. I am proud to announce that we continue to move forward with positive change and our City is wiser, stronger and more determined than ever. We developed a series of actions necessary for the city's recovery, prioritized our city finances, supported community programs, resources to restart and assist our small businesses and maintained our first responders to provide for essential public safety services.

In the last year we faced the COVID pandemic; we've had social issues that have fragmented our nation and recent international events, out of our control are making us stressed. And while the State of our City in fact great, we are all feeling the lasting affects of all of these issues. I want to take the time to thank our medical community an in particular the mental health professionals who often don't get the credit they deserve. I want to thank our first responders, our police, fire and EMS for all that they do and I want to thank our men and women in the military. As Mayor, I want to personally thank all of our city employees ands my staff for the tremendous work that they are doing every day to make Easton the city we all know t can be.

Lastly, I want to thank you, our business community who are gathered here for your perseverance through a really tumultuous three years.

During this time, one of my priorities became lobbying for the passing of the American Recovery Act, and once that historic legislation that gave direct funding to municipalities was approved, I lobbied hard for our proper funding level originally awarded at just \$2.6 million. I lobbied the Department of Treasury, the White House and our Congressional representatives and with the assistance of the National Leagues of Cities, The Pennsylvania Municipal League and Congresswoman Wild and Senator Casey we were awarded our proper allocation of \$20.7 million.

I am happy to report that we didn't just survive the pandemic; we thrived.

As a former history teacher, I need to give a small recap of where we came from because most people have now forgotten what Easton was like in 2008. Public drug sales, gangs, gun violence, prostitutes walking our streets and city finances in the red. Our bond rating was just above junk bond status. We had the Bloods, Crips and Latin Kings and other nationally known gangs living and causing fear in our neighborhoods. There was no pride left in Easton. Our residents were embarrassed to say they were from Easton and those that could afford it moved out of the city.

It's now 2023 and the State of our City is different. We are on a course of positive change. 2023 will be another year of *recovery, reinvestment, and rebuilding*. Easton is positioned for unprecedented growth and the positive changes will continue based on the solid foundation provided over the last 16 years. Our goal now is to manage this growth so we don't lose the many assets of our small city.

We are proud of the many recognition awards and acclaim Easton has received. Last year we received the Community of Distinction Award from the Lehigh Valley Planning Commission. Our Crayola Experience was recognized as one of the top 10 children's museums in the nation.

Our accomplishments are too many to list tonight, but our city grew in population for the first time on 5 decades, we exceeded \$1 Billion in public and private investment, and it didn't just occur in our urban center but in our neighborhoods as well. Growing our tax base and our population provides more tax ratables so we were able to keep real estate taxes level --- at the same rate it was in 2008.

We are committed to seeking to excel in all we do; to make our city safe, clean and fiscally sound. This historic city and its citizens deserve nothing less! Our goal every day is to continue our positive changes.

Beginning in the 60's we could have been a national poster child of a dying city. Today we can boast a vibrant urban center and safer neighborhoods. The last time we saw growth like we are experiencing was at the turn of the 20th century and Easton, yes Easton, was the largest of the three cities. We witnessed developments like the Hotel Easton, the 410 Northampton St. building. A three-story building on Centre Square was demolished to make way for the nine-story Alpha Portland Cement headquarters. Easton was growing! We are again witnessing investment families moving back to our neighborhoods. This year we announced a \$2 million city-wide façade grant program to assist our residents in fixing up their homes making our neighborhoods more attractive.

State and national leaders come to Easton. Last year, Governor Tom Wolf, visited our first of many affordable housing developments, the Mill at Easton. We were visited by HUD Secretary Marcia Fudge who visited Easton to witness and discuss our Choice Neighborhood Grant application to improve our housing in the West Ward; similar to what was done on the Southside with the Hope 6 program at the former Delaware Terrace.

Ensuring that Easton remains a premier small-town community is our goal. It's not easy – but no one said it would be easy. While we have so much to celebrate; we have even more to look forward to as we have much more to do to continue to make the positive changes needed.

Amidst all the exciting projects on the horizon, we remain focused on the fundamentals -- public safety and the services we provide our residents.

I look to turn our attention to further improving our neighborhoods and expanding our recreational offerings to our youth and seniors; implement our affordable housing plan and our climate action plan; and improve the quality of life for all of our residents.

We began in 2008 under the ominous cloud of the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression and the threat of State takeover under Act 47. We've come a long way!

Perhaps the biggest single issue we face is the economic health of our community. Our economic paradigm has undergone fundamental restructuring in the past 20 years. Gone are the mom-and-pop neighborhood businesses -- all being replaced by the big box stores. The result has been tough on many families and on our entire community. It's an issue that this City Administration is taking very seriously and yesterday we announced an assistance program that will help individuals start small businesses and keep existing businesses that provide neighborhood services and our retail community. It's a top priority and I know we can achieve our goal. Yesterday we announced our Small Business Assistance Program which will aide our small businesses in three areas including direct financial assistance. The program is city-wide.

Despite our progress, it's clear much work remains. Affordable housing and rental units, homelessness, hunger, inflation, family sustainable jobs, new small business start-ups, new fire facilities and my personal goal of a community center so our youth have the same opportunities as their suburban counterparts and to give them an alternative to the street. This community center will also need to house a senior center for our golden citizens where they can socialize and exercise and get a free lunch.

All the pieces are in place. That brighter future is not a foregone conclusion. We have to work long and hard and think outside the box to make it happen. Like when we were criticized for placing Larry Holmes Drive on a road-diet making the connection to our waterfront. Or making the ring road two-ways or beautifying the circle or thinking outside the box inaugurating our outdoor dining program or the Winter Village to help our restaurants and retailers. All of these and more have proven successful.

When the recession took away a large portion of City revenue, we reduced our spending dramatically. All but one of our City Council listened to our financial advisors and re-financed our debt at a time of historic low interest rates. This "scoop and toss" as it was referred to will save the city resident more than \$10 million and allowed the city to build a new parking garage at the lowest interest rates in recent history. It also reduces our annual debt service.

While history may see our recent past as some of the city's darkest, considerable light is now shining again on Easton, and our immediate future has rarely looked brighter. In a word, the State of the City is 'strong'! The sense of community in Easton is palpable. It always has been. You feel it whenever you come to Easton. Visitors tell me that all the time. They too may not live here but they too feel the vibrancy.

I'm certain that Easton's best days lie ahead. As generations of Eastonians have done before us, my team and I will continue to work tirelessly as we strive to create an even-better Easton for the generations that will follow.

Rarely in history has a city had the opportunities that we have right now in front of us. The opportunity to make generational and transformational change. To leap forward toward a better, brighter future. The influx of pandemic recovery money; federal, state and local infrastructure investment; and the strength and generosity of our private sector have all made available unprecedented resources for us.

Like cities across the country, we still have work to do to ensure all are — and feel — welcome. Diversity, Equity and Inclusion is a new label for what we have always strived for in Easton. We have made those words the hallmark of all of our departments, especially Human Resources. We have done well and can do even more! Within the next 60 days I will have an Ordinance to City Council that gives a preference to city residents to become a city employee but for civil service positions. Make no mistake, we have some of the best public employees and we will always hire the most qualified but city residents should have preference. We need policy direction from City Council to those that do the hiring.

I also announce tonight that Easton has been selected by the Lehigh Valley Juneteenth committee and will officially celebrate the end of slavery in our country with a flag raising on June 17th and the inaugural LV parade on June 19th. Juneteenth is believed to be the oldest African American holiday with celebrations going as far back as 1866. It's time ALL of us honor it as well.

The first thing we need to continue to make our city safe – We are proud to announce tonight that our crime rate has decreased again last year and every year for the last 15. Last year Easton experienced an overall decrease in crime of 24.9%. Part I crimes decreased by 10.87% and Part II crimes decreased by 29.48%. The most significant stat is total calls for service which has decreased by 10.56%.

I credit our police officers and our neighbors who are their eyes and ears. We made safety one of our primary goals and invested money into our police department making sure they have the proper equipment, facilities, and vehicles to keep our residents and the officers safe. I thank Council for their support of the purchase of our own BearCat which will aid in keeping our officers and residents safe.

I am very proud of our police. Last year our police department received its fifth reaccreditation, which placed our police department in the "Premier" status. The policies put in place and our body cameras have reduced and eliminated lawsuits immensely and taxpayers aren't paying hundreds of thousands of dollars annually for settlements and legal fees.

Our Fire Department hasn't gone unnoticed during this time either. Our current focus has been on equipment. We purchased two new pumpers, one pumper donated by Lafayette College and a new tiller truck was ordered for \$1.7 million and new radios are

being purchased plus location devices. We will also be purchasing a new commanded vehicle. Some of this was equipment was purchased with grants.

Financially the City did extremely well also. Our growth has had a positive impact our Earned Income Tax and we have seen an increase in our property tax even though we haven't raised the millage.

Our most significant success was our positive review by our credit agency – Standard and Poor who confirmed our management of city finances. S&P reaffirmed our 'A' rating and increased our outlook from 'negative' to 'stable.' S&P noted several drivers behind the positive shift including the "strategic decision to restructure debt in 2020 in the middle of the pandemic and when rates were at historic lows.

As Mayor, one of the roles I have is promoting and encouraging economic development. The total valuation of all new construction has exceeded \$1 Billion in public and private investment, This year we will see the completion of the Commodore and WaterMark Phase I ; the start of the construction on the Confluence and the Marquis; and the new hotel on Centre Square and the hotel on Rt 611. We are also working on finalizing the environmental cleanup of the Easton Iron and Metal property and it's development. On the neighborhood side we have appropriated \$2 million in façade restoration grants which is expected to leverage more than \$5 million in neighborhood housing improvements and witnessed the long-awaited reclamation of the blighted Black Diamond site and the vacant GAF building on the City's Southside. There are smaller, and equally important developments, also taking place such as the re-use of the former blighted buildings at Charles and Wilkes-Barre Sts. And Charles and Klienhans Sts.

The Easton Public Works Department is responsible for the maintenance and management of City's physical assets and infrastructure and has an annual budget of roughly \$17 million. The Department consists of the following Bureaus: Highways, Parks, Public Buildings, Parking Facilities, Engineering and Traffic Services, Recreation & Neighborhood Programs, Fleet Management, Wastewater Treatment, Storm Water and Sanitary Sewer Utilities, and Urban Forestry. The Department also provides a diverse array of residential services including trash and recycling pickup, municipal recycling drop-off & e-waste events, youth recreation, neighborhood programming, special events support, street sweeping, and curbside leaf and brush removal.

2022 was another extremely busy year for the Department as we managed the construction of several large projects including the Centre Square Rehabilitation, Ring Road 2-Way Conversion, and the Fourth Street Parking Garage. The Department was able to accomplish the objectives of its annual workplan for which the following are just some highlights:

- Completion of the Centre Square and Ring Road Improvements Project
- Expansion of northeast and southeast quadrants of Centre Square
- Conversion of 300 Block of Northampton Street to 1-way east
- Completion of In-depth hydraulic study of the proposed new Lehigh River Pedestrian Bridge

- Achievement of Platinum Certification through the PA Municipal League's Sustainable PA Program
- Completion of Year 4 of the City's MS4 permit requirements including construction of new storm water BMP's in Centre Square
- Completion of Energy End Use Assessment and Benchmarking Plan for the City's Climate Action Plan
- Completion of Easton Iron and Metal Site Planning Process
- Completion of conceptual design for South Sitgreaves Improvement Project
- Completion of the Wood Avenue Improvements design phase
- Completion of Gateway Signage for the 13th Street Interchange and Philadelphia Road
- Coordination of Bushkill Dam removal process – tentatively scheduled for 2023
- Completion of Wastewater Treatment Plant disk filter treatment process
- 200 Street Tree Plantings
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In the Human Resources Department our former HR Manager resigned to take a position in the private sector and Lucille _____ was hired. All positions were filled and goals for next year include: continuing the performance review program, developing a policy handbook and provide for more training opportunities.

City operations continue to see significant improvements with internal and external information technology. New servers were installed, all employee workstations were upgraded, a new parking software system was selected for on street and garage parking and will be implemented this year, and a citizen engagement tool was integrated into the city website.

Our Planning and Codes department continues to be busy based on the success of our economic development program. The department received and processed 1,738 applications, of which 1,315 were construction permits for 1,731 trades, an 11.75% increase over 2021.

A slowdown in property transfers was expected, but the 423 buyer notification inspection requests was 460 less than last year, significantly less than anticipated. These applications resulted in 2,392 permit inspections, a 5% increase, and 546 buyer notification inspections, a 61.8% decrease. Other applications processed include 68 Certificate of Appropriateness, 348 Zoning, and 47 Zoning Appeals.

A new addition with the implementation of OpenGov Citizen Services is an online portal to receive complaints, which has resulted in 162 reports submitted. Code officers investigated 2,283 cases, which resulted in improved quality of life and the collection of \$2,610 in Quality of Life Tickets.

The Health Bureau issued 491 food establishment licenses throughout the year, of which eleven were for new facilities, eight were a change of operator. Additionally, the bureau processed nine handicap parking requests, four tattoo licenses, one salvage yard license. Additionally, 323 temporary food service licenses were issued for the many festivals and events throughout the city. Health inspections increased to 437 during the year, an increase of 14%.

Working with the Mayor, The Department of Community and Economic Development received \$8 million in RACP grants for the Fourth St Parking Garage, the Marquis and the Water Mark. In addition, the Department:

- ❖ Received approval for an additional \$5,705,000 in state and federal grants to assist City departments and priority community & economic development projects (see attached Exhibit "A").
- ❖ Applied for an additional 11 grants totaling \$4,700,000: decisions pending.
- ❖ Total approved grants equated to 99% of the requested amount and the department maintained an astonishing 83% win-rate on grant applications submitted.
- ❖ Closed out of an additional \$1,200,000 in grants that were approved in previous years, but projects were completed in 2022.
- ❖ Co-administered and implemented programming and planning for Winter Village 2022.
 - Co-managed event operations.
 - Developed grants and pursued sponsorships for the program – raised in coordination with GEDP more than \$70,000 in total for the event.
 - Processed 37 vendor applications for participation, yielding \$25,000 in fees to support the program and related expenses.
 - Managed budget to breakeven.
 - Attracted 45,000 attendees to the event during its five-weekend run.
- ❖ Led program development and managed Outdoor Dining Program, Year 3:
 - Developed funding for the program and branded "Easton Alfresco".
 - Processed more than 15 applications for participation and issued permits for operation in public right-of-way.
 - Coordinated individual implementation strategies for participants.
 - Enforced guidelines of the program in collaboration with other departments.
- ❖ Completed initial site development plan for Easton Iron & Metal in coordination with partners.
- ❖ Developed and completed initial phase of RFP for public art in the SE Quadrant:
 - Received 10 proposals and assembled review committee consisting of local artists, regional experts and SE quadrant business owners.
- ❖ Completed Year 2 of ARPA management:

- Prepared and submitted to U.S. Treasury the required ARPA quarterly reports.
 - Reports were approved without incident.
- Provided oversight to projects leading to obligation of \$7.2 million and the expenditure of more than \$6 million of the total \$20.7 million allocation. Funds were utilized for infrastructure, youth health programs, targeted nonprofit assistance, affordable housing, and community and business support, among other things.
- ❖ Assisted in preparation for S&P credit review and served on presentation team. The work of this team led to an upgrade to the City’s economic outlook to “Stable” from “Negative” and reaffirmed the “A” long-term rating.

I would like to thank Easton residents, the business community, my fellow City Council Members, City Manager Campos, and of course City staff for all their work. Together, we are creating a city beyond what any one of us could imagine alone. We must have a sense of urgency to work together to go where we want — and where we need to be as a city.

We spent a lot of time developing our downtown. The downtown is the heart that pumps vigor to the rest of the city. With that in mind I am announcing tonight that I will be setting up four neighborhood meetings to seek volunteers from each to form Neighborhood Advisory Task Forces to develop the priorities for each section of our city. These priorities will become the basis for our five-year plan.

What we do today will shape tomorrow. We have a very real opportunity to build a better, brighter future for all of us and for generations to come. Our time is now. I challenge you to be unabashedly enthusiastic about our city. I know I am. We say it to ourselves all the time — how lucky we are, what an awesome place this is.

And we are Unstoppable in character, determination and progress. Our journey isn’t over yet in Easton. We’ve already done so much together, but I know the full potential of our city is yet to be seen. We will continue to work together to make Easton’s best days stand before us.

Even with all that we’ve achieved, there is so much more that can be done.

Our first goal is to implement the recommendations of the Mayor’s Affordable Housing Task Force. Housing affordability isn’t just facing Easton but the entire nation. Studies indicate that America is 11 million housing units short. Our plan will prioritize keeping residents in their homes and closing the racial wealth gap by boosting home ownership.

We also worked hard on other neighborhood problems. Protecting the character of our single-family neighborhoods. We want our neighborhoods to be welcoming to everyone in our City, regardless of race, religion, ethnicity or income. In December,

Our goal is to implement our Climate Action Plan that was developed over the last few years. I know not everyone agrees, but climate change is the single biggest threat to humankind. The consequences of doing nothing are unimaginably horrible and that's why I, along with 467 of my mayor colleagues signed the Paris Accord.

Another goal is to build a community center for our youth and seniors. I've wanted to do this for many years, but our finances didn't allow it.

More than anything the basis for these goals will always be a Clean and Safe City with Fiscal responsibility.

As I said, the State of our City is strong because of our character, our instincts, and the work we are all committed to doing to better ourselves and our community.

I know that sometimes, progress isn't easy. Sometimes, we must persevere for every inch of improvement. Every derelict house taken down. Every pothole filled. Every deadly weapon seized. Every youth that can finally spend a fun and safe day in a community center, park or pool. But that's a fight worth having – and one we intend to win.

As Easton continues to grow, we must ensure that our city's prosperity makes it to every corner of our city. This can only happen if our city remains fiscally responsible and provides a welcoming environment for large and small businesses that produce quality jobs and pay living wages. We must focus on expanding public-private partnerships that benefit our residents and the city.

And, we're happy to say that last year, after being cancelled or scaled back due to the pandemic, many of our signature events were back last year.

were able to pave more roads than in any other single year in decades:

While we continue to navigate the long-term effects of the pandemic, we do so confidently, working toward a promising future. Through it all, Easton has come out stronger. We've prioritized the health of our community members, continued to expand technology, supported our many local businesses with programs that enabled them to navigate the pandemic, and continued developing initiatives to address economic recovery, homelessness, climate change, diversity, and more. I'm excited to build on our tremendous work in the coming year. We remain committed to navigating the challenges that arise, and I am hopeful our journey together will result in Easton's continued triumphs.

Completing more major projects, purchasing more new equipment, paving more roads, etc. We're able to do this for three reasons: First, we have become more efficient and have eliminated unnecessary spending in the process. Second, because of our dedicated city employees. And the third reason is due to an all-out effort by our on-staff grant writers to secure state and federal aid as well as private philanthropic grants; and my

lobbying efforts. We have secured more than \$85 million in county, state and federal grants.

I was born and raised in the Southside neighborhood of Easton, where my wife Pam and I still live, and my entire adult life I have poured my heart and soul into this community that I love. I started my involvement with my church youth organization and while in college I was appointed to the Board of Directors of St. Anthony's Youth Center, now Easton Area Community Center. I served for more than 25 years and as President for two. While teaching at Easton Junior High School I became a member of the Easton Area Jaycees thanks to former Mayor Mike McFadden and was elected President and served as Chairman of many of the city festivals, including Community Spirit Day and the first combined Easton-Phillipsburg Halloween Parade.

How does it feel to be mayor? "BUSY" But it's also so much more than that. It can feel surreal and stressful, exhausting and empowering—it feels like the most important work in the world. But more than anything, it feels like a gift: To be able to get up every day and go to work for the city I love with people who love it, too. People unafraid to do things differently, willing to meet crises with creativity, and reach deep in the dirt to pull up the roots of the challenges that block our view of the sky.

All the pieces are in place. But a brighter future is not a foregone conclusion. We have to create it for ourselves. We must continue to work hard and think outside the box to make it happen.

I'd like to leave you with one final thought as I close. Young people are 20% of our city's population but they are 100% of our future. You and I must do all we can to ensure that they become contributing members of our thriving community.

Together we will continue our course of positive change. We will never let Easton become city that stops reaching up toward the progress we know to be possible.

Thank you, and God bless the city —and people—of Easton.