

# STATE OF THE CITY

***"We will not survive the pandemic --- we will thrive!"***  
***Easton Mayor Sal Panto, 2020***

When I took office in 2008 the common words were Bloods, Crips, Latin Kings, violence, gangs, shootings, drugs, etc. Today it's not those words but growth, economic recovery from a global pandemic, new businesses --- and yes parking.

I don't need to tell you that the past couple of years have been difficult, but as Mayor I'm proud to tell you that Easton is stronger. We are a resilient, thriving community that is setting the standard to which other communities aspire. We are recognized throughout the State and are even getting recognized around the country for our renaissance. We have hosted Governor Wolf here to open and address our affordable housing crisis and recently we had a visit from HUD Secretary Marcia Fudge. When asked why she was in Easton the Secretary replied --- *"because Easton does it right."*

## COVID slide

Make no mistake, we continue to battle the global challenges we face, namely the public health crisis precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic fallout that the novel coronavirus has placed on our economy.

It seemed like one day I was invited to the White House briefing for Mayors about this thing called COVID with then Vice-President Pence and the next week, society and our economy came to a halt. Suddenly, COVID was threatening the lives of the most vulnerable in our society, throwing millions out of work, shuttering schools and businesses. The next two years seem to be a blur to me as they started to meld together.

## First Responder Slide

As local leaders – together with the essential workers in healthcare, police, fire, and our medical emergency responders, this Administration has been on the frontlines, daily, dealing with one crisis after another. The good news is that this pandemic now seems to be at a manageable level – but the journey is far from over as we continue to recover and rebuild Easton as most of our projects and programs were delayed for the two years.

It is an honor to serve as Mayor in my hometown. Together, we're going to continue to accomplish remarkable things. We'll continue to improve core services; we'll continue to grow our local and regional economy; we'll continue to improve our quality of life; we'll continue to maintain the financial foundation we built; we will continue to provide Council with a balanced budget with no tax increase as we have since I took office; and we'll continue to work hard to include everyone in our city's story.

## COVID vaccine slide

However, the pandemic isn't over, and you may have personal reasons not to get vaccinated but please get vaccinated for the loved ones around you. We need your help to fight back the COVID virus.

Last year brought external challenges that were unprecedented, and they all happened at the same time. Not just the pandemic. Add to that a country that had racial justice issues, and questions on our election process and an attack on our Capitol.

We had additional issues facing Easton – an ongoing pandemic, public safety challenges, barriers to justice and opportunity, finances, climate change, homelessness, inflation, supply chain issues, labor shortages, affordable housing, increase in mental illness, infrastructure needs, and so much more.

The key to our success was that we confronted the reality of the situation. We responded even before we knew exactly what we were facing. There was a long list of innovative steps we took that were tailored to the specific needs of Easton, some of which garnered regional attention, like our outside dining program and the second annual Winter Village, but nothing as important as the refinancing this Council approved as recommended by our Financial Advisors.

Many of our neighbors faced tragedy over the past two years. Please join me in a moment of silence keeping in our prayers all who have lost loved ones during the pandemic and now Russia invades Ukraine --- the world is at war. We pray for the people of Ukraine, we pray for our service members, first responders and their families, and thank them for their service and sacrifice as they continue to strive to uphold and protect the ideals of our democracy, a democracy that is not only threatened from abroad, but threatened domestically as well.

### **ARPA Slide**

Our biggest success in 2021 was our American Rescue Plan Act allocation. The federal government finally realized with the passing of President Biden's American Rescue Plan that if you want to reopen America you start at the local level. For Easton, we were short changed. Specifically for me, it meant daily phone calls and letter writing to get our fair share. With the assistance of Senator Casey, Congresswoman Wild, The National League of Cities and the Pennsylvania Municipal League, we were able to increase our allocation to the appropriate amount --- from \$2.6 million to \$20.7 million which will find its way to various and needed programs this year and next year.

### **Organization Slide**

Please understand the magnitude of this legislation. This is the first time that local municipalities received direct funding. We truly must thank our membership in the National League of Cities, The US Conference of Mayors, and the Pennsylvania Municipal League. As a member of the Board of Directors of two of those important local government organizations, and as the former President of the PML, I can attest to the lobbying efforts of the staff and local officials across this nation. Now we have the responsibility to use

these funds to address the effects of the pandemic and improve our city and the quality of life of our residents.

### **Housing Slide**

The most significant and most difficult issue we are working to address right now is the housing crisis. There is no “silver bullet” solution to address this housing crisis, it is mostly a lack of supply and a market driven issue. Tonight my Affordable Housing Task Force will present their report for your consideration. These volunteers worked hard before and through the pandemic to give me their report. My Administration has begun to assemble properties to be included in our program. We recently purchased several properties. We are also assisting in the construction of another 52 affordable rental units in addition to the 55 affordable units **Mill at Easton Slide** that will open later this month at the Mill at Easton. I look forward to discussions with Council on this important issue facing our city.

When we took office our goal was to *“develop the whole town not just the downtown.”* Easton’s historic and diverse neighborhoods are the life blood of our city. The positive impact of new investment in our neighborhoods can be seen in every area of the city. And the ARPA funds for facade rehabilitation and affordable housing will directly improve our neighborhoods. **Six neighborhood slides**

As much as I’m ready to put 2021 behind us, it’s important to recognize all of the City’s accomplishments last year. Despite a global pandemic, I am still amazed at what we accomplished. None of the services we provide would be possible without a cohesive City Council and dedicated senior staff and public employees. I thank every one of our city employees for their efforts.

### **School Slide**

Last year we opened the new Cheston Elementary School. All three neighborhood schools in the city have been restored like March and the former Junior High School or rebuilt, like Cheston Elementary School including the iconic Cottingham Stadium.

### **Easton Alfresco slide**

Easton’s vibrant arts and entertainment district continues to be a destination that draws thousands of people into Easton every week. They come for shows at the State Theatre, dinner at one of our more than 36 culinary destinations or a family visit to the Crayola Experience, the Sigal Museum or Nurture Nature. Yesterday met with city restaurant owners to finalize our recommendation for our outdoor dining program to be presented to Council at our March 23 meeting.

### **Lafayette Slide**

Our town-gown partnership with Lafayette College continues to be emulated by others. The new residence hall at Lafayette opened along with the Trolley Stop diner and the new bookstore. Also last year Lafayette inducted a new President. We are excited to work with new President Nicole Farmer-Hurd, the Board of Trustees, faculty and staff to continue the positive town-gown partnership we have developed over the last 20 years.

In addition to President Byerly leaving we also said goodbye to Men's Basketball Coach Fran O'Hanlon for his 27 years at the helm of Lafayette's Basketball program. I named February 26<sup>th</sup> as Fran O'Hanlon Day in Easton not just for his career as basketball coach but also for the many organizations he and his players helped during his 27 years. This year will bring a new and expanded parking deck and new pedestrian safe improvements to Cattell St.

### **Parking Garage Slide**

This year will see the opening of the new city parking garage, the mixed-use Commodore **Slide** which will also bring offices, a roof-top restaurant and apartments overlooking the Delaware River. Recently the opening of the **Slide** Seville, we also look forward, this year and next, the **Slide** Marquis, **Slide** WaterMark, and this year to the start of the **Slide** Confluence. This year we will also work to secure a new location for the Nurture Nature Center across from the Karl Stirner Arts Trail. We are competing for a \$4 million EDA grant to help fund the project which will be parts of a larger development by VM Development. A new affordable rental project will also begin in 2023. We will also be launching a façade restoration program for our neighborhoods, and we look forward to building new homes as part of our affordable housing program.

With these developments we have almost one billion dollars of investment in the last 13 years and will add as many as 2500 to our population, almost replacing the 3700 that were displaced by the urban renewal years and the more than 10,000 then fled to the suburbs in the 60's and 70's.

Our primary goals will always be **Clean and Safe** with a strong financial base.

The Police Department, under Director/Chief Carl Scalzo, worked tirelessly throughout the pandemic and placed themselves at significant risk to insure a bright and safe future after the pandemic.

### **Crime Graph Slide**

I am very pleased to report to you, -- AGAIN, that for the last 11 years the crime rate for violent UCR Part I crimes has decreased by 7.84%. Given the state of our nation during these violent times, this is incredible. Since 2008 the crime rate for Part I crimes has decreased from 1,302 Part 1 crimes to 423 last year.

As the chart indicates, Part I crimes have decreased from 459 in 2020 to 423 in 2021. Just as important, calls for service decreased by 18.69%.

### **Millage Slide**

The financial integrity of Easton is something of which I am most proud because it directly impacts our residents and their ability to stay in their homes and encourages more investment in our city. The Finance Department, under Director Mark Lysynecky, continues to work closely with the Administration.

First and foremost, this Administration has not raised real estate taxes. Nor have we raised fees paid for by our residents since 2009. We have also taken Easton from deficits in

2008 as we entered office to a \$6 million surplus and this does not take into account the revenue replacement from ARPA.

Our budgets have ended with a surplus every year with an annual increase in our Pension's Mandatory Municipal Obligations (MMO) to almost \$6 million up from less than \$2 million . Our pension investments are doing well under the direction of Mike Glovas and Morgan Stanley who are continuously monitoring the City's Pension allocation and risk in the markets. When the conflict in Ukraine developed, the Pension Managers took action selling off Russian securities. At this time the managers have advised that Russian securities pose no risk to the City's pension. The market value of the fund is more than \$71 Million an increase \$40 million in 2008.

Standard and Poor continues to give us an A rating – so our credit is high quality and very low risk. This excellent rating will save our taxpayers millions over the next two decades on our capital investments.

### **Population Slide**

Unfortunately, COVID stalled some of the developments and we didn't reach our population goal of 30,000 in the 2020 census. We know this number is low, especially since the census was cut short by almost months and they didn't count the Lafayette students but with the new developments planned we will exceed the mark. Why? Simple, because the cost of government can be shared over a larger population of people.

### **Fire Department Slide**

The Fire Department also worked through the pandemic assuring our residents that they were ready to respond to any rescue emergency. This year the Fire Department responded to 1713 calls for service of which 10 were Building fires, 415 emergency medical service calls and 654 non-emergency activities. Thankfully, there were no fire fatalities in 2021 or injuries to civilians.

### **DPW Slide**

Under the team led by Director David Hopkins, Public Works is the largest department. The Department not only had a full calendar of activities and tasks but also had to deal with the same supply chain logistics as the private sector.

### **Tree Slide**

DPW also handles most of our environmental issues. To date, this Administration has planted 4,800 trees of our 5,000 goal. They also implement the City's Climate Action Plan. We completed Year 3 of our MS4 Stormwater Management Plan. We implemented innovative initiatives in sustainability, such as energy upgrades at the wastewater treatment plant and the implementation of our Climate Action Plan. This year we will even be looking to purchase hybrid police patrol cars as we look to meet our CO2 gas emissions goals. In addition to a cleaner environment each vehicle will save the city thousands of dollars in gasoline purchases.

The Department also maintained 105 miles of roadway, 33 miles of underground storm sewers, 200 catch basins and 120 outfalls to 3 water tributaries; maintained 30 parks; as well as the 44 Acre Hackett Park and the 250-acre Hugh Moore Park, both within the city's corporate boundaries; and 2 public pools. The Department has 175 vehicles and pieces of equipment, more than 8,000 street signs and markings and an annual budget of \$17 million.

### [Open Gov Slide](#)

Due to our aggressive economic development, our Planning and Codes Department, under Director Stephen Norowski, continues to see an increase in permit activity. There were 433, or 22%, more applications filed during 2021, making the year the most active to date, with a 3.5% increase over the previous high in 2018.

The department received and processed 2,432 applications, of which 1,549 were construction permits and 883 were Buyer Notification Inspection requests. These requests resulted in 2,277 permit inspections and 948 buyer notification inspections.

Additionally, our Code Compliance Officers created 2,356 code enforcement cases, logged 4,387.6 activity hours in low- to moderate-income neighborhoods, and issued a 28% increase in Quality-of-Life Tickets.

Certified Blighted properties were reduced by six to 23 with another five currently under construction to be removed from the list.

The Health Bureau issued 212 Food Establishment Licenses, conducted 383 health inspections, an increase of more than 29%, of which 18 were for new facilities and issued 203 Special Event Licenses. In addition to normal duties, the Health Department was active in providing COVID-19 guidance and monitoring facilities for compliance with the Governor's emergency orders.

The Planning and Codes Department worked to improve its online presence for enhanced access and convenience to all our stakeholders. With the selection of OpenGov, the department has worked to create an intuitive online portal to receive all applications, reducing our need for paper. The website went "live" last month. The new system will increase efficiencies for the department and will allow for better coordination between the department bureaus (code, health, planning, and zoning), but also between with other departments such as Public Works and Finance. It will also generate better data reports.

As stated, the Department of Community and Economic Development under Director John Kingsley, has also been extremely busy. [DCED Slides](#) [School of Rock and Townley](#)

Last year we successfully secured \$6,250,000 in the highly competitive RCAP state grants. Let me remind Council that these grants are extremely competitive, and we have been very successful in being awarded more than \$80 million in county, state and federal grants. The other branches of government know that Easton is a good investment.

### [Assessment Slide](#)

Our City Administrator Luis Campos never envisioned having to work through both a global pandemic and real estate boom in the same time frame. There were days in 2021 where the City's work force faced human capital shortages due to the ongoing COVID Pandemic leaving both management and Union groups to work together and solve labor shortage issues and there were moments where management had vigorous internal debates on how to manage the growth of the City including modernizing systems to more efficiently operate government and to provide data to policy makers.

In the short run we are able to forecast financial and economic certainty, but there remains external risks from market unknowns if the pandemic again intensifies.

### **Healthcare slide**

Under the direction of or Human Resources Manager Stephanie Weber, the Administration has adopted several strategies to control healthcare costs including: dealing directly with prescription carriers; introduction of a high deductible plan with the city contributions to a Health Savings Account; increased plan deductibles; continued emphasis on consumerism and employee wellness plans. [Workers Comp Slide](#)

During 2021 the City Administration and Human Resources came to a contract agreement with the Fraternal Order of Police Lodge 17 avoiding costly Act 111 arbitration. The contract is a 4-year contract.

### **IT Slide**

In 2021 we retained Mazen Fares to oversee our Information Technology department. We purchased server hardware to virtualize City Hall; reviewed and improved security for networks and systems; deployed of new Firewall appliance for City Hall building; deployed new hardware for the Police Department and new servers to upgrade City Hall datacenter operations; and also deployed Multi-Factor Authentications to improve security and remote access.

If 2020 and 2021 were a low point, we must make 2022 a turning point. To renew our community takes vision, hard work, and cooperation. As we say, we may not have a NIZ like Allentown, or a CRIZ like Bethlehem --- we do it the old-fashioned way – we work hard!

### **Winter Market Slide**

For example, our Public Works employees helped to erect the Peace Candle and set up the ice-skating rink and Winter Village all within a week. Thanks to the hard work of many people, our partnership with GEDP and our sponsors, we have now secured The Winter Village as an annual event. It was very successful helping retailers through the pandemic. Just this year two of our "hut retailers" -- Easton Candle Company and Isasuma -- have opened brick and mortar stores in our downtown.

Our intent is to move forward on key public investments in the city. New city entrance signage and streetscape improvements on the Southside; the Centre Square upgrade project, the first in 60 years; the upgrade of Wood Avenue; completion of the new decorative streetlights on Northampton St. in the West Ward; completion of the feasibility study for a pedestrian bridge over the Lehigh from Larry Holmes Drive to Route 611; upgrades to all of the neighborhood pocket parks; the Choice Neighborhoods grant

application which, if awarded, would help to recreate the Union Street public housing in the West Ward and build a development similar to Neston-Heights. Lafayette College will also be assisting the city with pedestrian improvements and streetscape improvements to Cattell Street, which should start this summer.

### **Summer Playground Slide**

I will also be recommending to the City Council's ARPA budget that we bring back the Summer Playground Program at Nevin Park, Centennial Park, Vanderveer Park, Lachenour Park and Pioneer Park. Complete with programs, games and sports. We will hire 10 counselors.

I stand before you this evening in awe – in awe of the people I've had the privilege to work with during a year that weighed so heavily on us. Individuals, who despite facing unprecedented challenges, have continued to forge ahead and strive to beat the odds. Because of the ingenuity, compassion and determination of our staff and citizens, the State of our City is stronger than ever.

It's been said that if you want to go somewhere fast, go alone, but if you want to go somewhere far, go together. This might be one of the greatest lessons learned from the last two years -- that together, we are stronger than ever.

As I look at the politics that seem to be dividing our country nationally, I am proud that in Easton, people of all philosophies, ethnic and racial backgrounds and political views we have been able to keep it civil, keep it constructive, and keep it neighborly.

They say people are always looking for the shining city on the hill. Easton was founded and built on seven hills. While we still have neighborhoods that need investment, schools that need more support, and have so many hard-working residents still searching for their share of the American Dream -- each of those seven hills and the valleys in between, shine with a spirit of determination, generosity, and respect for one another that glows brighter than any other corner of this great country. Thanks to a lot of hard work Easton is once again becoming that shining city.

Leaders cannot lead without a team. I am blessed to work with individuals who wave the banner of Easton high. A big "Thank you" to my Team and our residents for working to improve the quality of life for every person who comes through our doors and calls Easton home.

I would like to thank my wife Pam and my family. They have not only supported me but have also been my sounding board on many of the issues we face.

**Winter Market Slide** Yes, our vision is progressive and bold. We are not afraid to try new things. This journey and our fight for progress has been exciting to say the least. And yes, we may have been given additional challenges the last two years but that didn't deter our vision for Easton. Festivals bring people to Easton to experience urban life and they return to shop and dine.

**Challenges Slide** When we first encountered COVID I set a goal that we would not only to survive, we would thrive. The State of the City is Easton continues to thrive and we are restoring the Pride in Easton.

**Flag Slide** we are restoring the pride in Easton. Thank you and God Bless Easton.