

**REBUILD.**

**REBOUND.**

**ADAPT.**



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**STATE OF THE CITY**

**JAMESTOWN  
NEW YORK**

2021

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**PRESENTED BY**  
MAYOR EDWARD A. SUNDQUIST  
JANUARY 25, 2021

**PRESENTED TO THE MEMBERS OF THE  
JAMESTOWN CITY COUNCIL ON THE  
25TH DAY OF JANUARY, 2021**

To Council President Dolce, Council Members, and to our residents-

Last year, I presented a State of the City Report marked with a stark financial picture, but filled with hope for the year ahead in terms of what I know we could accomplish. Looking back, no one could have predicted that the year would be focused on reacting to an international pandemic impacting every resident, business, and touching all pockets of our community. No one was prepared for the social and financial implications such a phenomenon would bring. As a City, we were forced to do things we had not seen in decades; sending employees home, drastically reducing staffing, and shutting down operations for long stretches of time.

Sometimes the toughest moments in this job aren't the actions we take, but the feedback we receive from those we serve. Back in late March, I received a letter from one of our young residents, Madeline. She wrote:

“Dear Mayor Sunquist, On Monday I studied Coronah vires-19. I know How to avoid the cronah Vires-19. But I am afraid that my family members are going to die. Do you have any tips for me? [...] Are you scared for some of your relltives?”

-Madeline

I remember how that letter made me pause and sit quietly at my desk. COVID-19 brought about some of the scariest things we have seen, and some of the deadliest effects. It forced us to take swift action early on, like enacting a financial restructuring plan cutting 1.2 million dollars from our budget, reimagining how we deal with members of the public, providing direct support to our struggling community, and even finding ways to protect our own employees from the ravages of this disease.

I wrote Madeline back a few days later, and I told her the following:

“I know with all the things you see, hear, and learn, everything may seem very scary, especially the thought of losing the ones we love. Just like you, I think about my family every day and how hard it would be to lose one of them. But, I want to tell you a secret. Each day, I come to work at City Hall, and I think about all the ways I can protect my family, your family, and everyone in the City of Jamestown from this disease. It is not easy telling people

what they can and can't do, but when we want to make sure all of our relatives stay healthy, it's the best we can do right now.

I hope you continue writing in your journal every day, but make sure you include your fears. Even mayors keep journals, and I can tell you for a fact I include my fears in it. Once we know what our fears are, once we hear them out loud, they no longer become scary, and we start to look for ways to overcome them.

Thank you again for your letter. Be strong and remember, we will get through this together.”

I have thought about Madeline's letter every day since. It makes me realize why we, as a City, continue. Why we, as a City, strive to keep our community healthy and thriving, and how we must put aside our fears and push forward for each and every resident. My State of the City Report is about a City overcoming a pandemic to modernize, about focusing on protecting and serving our community through reimaged public safety and bridging divides, and about tackling our financial challenges of our businesses and of our own City. This report is about how the City of Jamestown plans to rebuild, rebound, and adapt to a rapidly changing world.

## **2020 ACCOMPLISHMENTS**

Before looking forward, we must look back on what we, as a City, accomplished this year. Given the pandemic, we have no shortage of action items that got done this year. We are moving towards a digital City-Wide information sharing platform that connects each of our departments together, and we are investing in contactless solutions to better interact with the public. Consider this, for the first time ever, we accepted tax bill payments online and posted our tax bills on the City's website.

We have also increased transparency and accessibility in City government. Since the first City Council meeting in 2020, we have streamed every public meeting, hearing, and press event, created community engagement with the establishment of a City-wide social media presence, and are working towards a complete website redesign. This process will soon allow us to provide emergency and informational alerts via email and text message for all residents. On top of that, at the recommendation of the City Council, we provided language translation services for every department, so that no matter what you speak, you can interact with your government without fear of a language barrier.

At the start of the year, it was no secret that our City was left with a mess related to ambulance service, a dire situation that still exists. However, we took great steps this year in working towards a solution by re-negotiating a contract with our City's primary ambulance provider, ALSTAR, and creating a new agreement with the

Chautauqua County on providing advanced life support services for our ambulance transports. Both agreements now result in the City being able to bill insurance for transports, which will hopefully provide much needed funding for critical, additional staffing in our Fire Department.

As a City, we provided just under one million dollars in COVID-19 Relief Grants through the Jamestown Urban Renewal Agency. We were the first City in all of Western New York to create not only a business relief fund, but a rental relief fund to ensure all of our residents had the ability to pay rent and keep a roof over their heads. In addition, we created a utility payment assistance fund in conjunction with the Board of Public Utilities, to help residents get back on their feet and avoid any future utility shut offs.

Amidst national turmoil and racial tension that sprung up across our nation this past year and our citizens stood up and demanded action. Working hand in hand, we re-established our Human Rights Commission to foster better relationships in the community, tackle racial inequality and human rights violations, and help ensure we have a positive relationship with our public safety officers.

All of this as we ushered in a new administration, with new department heads in almost every part of City government. We selected a new police chief during the middle of civil unrest in our nation. We selected a new deputy fire chief during the middle of a pandemic, and we installed a new clerk, comptroller, and city attorney. 2020 was a year of great change in the City. I am proud of the work each and every department has done throughout the year, and could not have asked for better leadership to keep our employees calm and safe during this pandemic.

### **LOOKING TOWARDS OUR FUTURE**

It is time for us, as a community, to look towards the future and continue our modernization efforts. Some of the top priorities going into this year include the increased access to information and data for our citizens. Soon, we will have a public portal set up for residents to report concerns, see issues on properties, and better understand how the City makes decisions based on the calls we get.

In addition, we want our citizens to have access to our finances and get a grasp on how tax-payer money is being spent. We are working on developing a financial accountability portal with our Comptroller's Office so every person can see the City's financial data for themselves.

Lastly, we will continue to work to modernize our fire operations. When I first got into office, I toured each fire station, only to find out we had no computers or internet in any outside station. We were still hand-writing all our reports on carbon-

copy paper. We have been working to find and establish software to digitally report fire operations and provide electronic reporting to hospitals on ambulance calls.

## **REIMAGINING PUBLIC SAFETY**

It is no secret this year has been a challenge for the development of our public safety program. It was a year of change and progress. Our police chief of many years retired and we underwent a community effort to pick the next Chief of Police. I am proud of the appointment of Chief Timothy Jackson and his community outreach initiatives in just a few short months. We started challenging our officers to get out of their cars and meet our community in a different light.

You may have seen some our officers sledding with our children down at the Allen Park Bandshell, a video that gained regional news and over 2 million views. Or, you may have met our newest officer, “Hope,” a therapy dog meant to comfort victims of domestic violence. 2021 brings about new community connections and even greater diversity. In the first year alone, we have hired officers from all walks of life, including minority officers, female officers, Spanish-language speaking officers, even an officer that can connect with our hard-of hearing community members through American Sign language. All officers that can better understand and connect with our community.

Looking forward, I am excited for our team to increase our ability to serve the community. Our police department will have now a community engagement and victim services captain to develop and implement a citizen’s police academy, and connect with our residents in new ways. In addition, our police department continues to work closely with our mental health community partners to develop a program where no matter the call, we can connect a resident to much needed mental health services and support.

## **FOCUSING ON OUR NEIGHBORHOODS**

For many years, the City’s focus has been on development of the downtown core. Although we have seen great strides, we have done so at the perils of our neighborhoods. A city is only as good as its neighbors. With the passage of our new Comprehensive Action Plan through Housing and Urban Development, we have reinvented our housing and neighborhood development programs. Now, for the first time in decades, we have allocated funding to improve neighborhoods and provide direct funding to responsible homeowners to make necessary repairs to their homes.

At the same time, we want to hold irresponsible and out-of-sight landlords accountable. We have been working directly with the University at Buffalo Law School Clinical Program to help us draft local legislation to force inspections of rental units across the City. We are working towards a program that will allow landlords

that regularly communicate with the City and keep their properties up to date pay less in fees and fines, and penalize those that fail to keep even minimum living standards.

I've been to every ward and street in this City. I have walked with neighbors as they talk about living conditions in their neighborhood. I cannot let our neighborhoods slip by. Starting this year, we will be bringing together federal, state, local, and community partners to sweep up neighborhoods and fight blight. We will be working with neighbors to clean up junk and debris, help repair homes and properties, push out crime, and work to ensure our residents get the mental help they need. I'm looking at you, 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> streets between Main and Washington. Your neighbors have had enough and we are going to come together as a community and turn it around.

We aren't stopping there. Our legal team has started lawsuits on 19 properties across the City and in every ward where homes sit empty and banks are letting properties rot. Under New York State's Zombie Property law, we will be aggressively going after out-of-state banks that have left properties to rot. Banks can be assessed civil penalties of up to \$500 for each day they leave a property unmanaged.

If we want to be a modern City, we need to look at modern tax structures as well. Under our current system, if you make additional improvements to your home, your home value rises, and your taxes increase. But if you let your home go by the wayside; your tax basis stays the same or reduces. With home values in Jamestown so low, there is no incentive for property owners to invest into their homes, creating a vicious cycle of decay. We have started looking into changes in New York State tax law that would allow us, as a City, to incentivize those that make improvements or build on vacant lots through lowered taxes, and raise taxes for those that invest nothing into their homes and their neighborhoods.

### **TACKLING OUR COMMUNITY DIVIDES**

If nothing else, this pandemic has shown some monstrous divides in our community. One that stands out is the lack of support for minority and disadvantaged businesses. There is not one minority-owned business in Jamestown registered with the State of New York. My team has set out to change that mentality and start to support our disadvantaged businesses, whether they be minority owned, woman owned, or veteran owned. We are starting to work closely with the Jamestown Local Development Corporation, the Small Business Association, and local business consultants to help recruit, develop, register, and support disadvantaged businesses. We have also started the process to change our business loans to provide greater lending potential for such businesses.

Also facing our community is a widening gap for childcare options. Did you know that one of the top stumbling blocks for getting a job in this area is lack of adequate child care? We need to ensure there are places and spaces for our children to go. I am excited to be working closely with the State through its Regional Economic Development Council to focus on getting funding to provide access to quality childcare right here in Jamestown.

Hand in hand with issues facing our children is a digital divide facing our community. During the pandemic, I spoke with countless folks that couldn't afford internet access for their children, or job seekers who couldn't access internet job applications because the library was closed and they had no personal internet connections. Even remote workers who constantly mentioned how spotty our connections have become in this area as they connect to companies across the globe. Now, more than ever, we must investigate and invest in municipal broadband for our community. A low cost, high speed option that could provide a free lifeline connection to those in need, and a lower cost option to residents and businesses. I am excited to announce the formation of a Municipal Broadband Taskforce to look into seeing if the City can develop a municipal broadband program through the BPU.

### **ADRESSING OUR FINANCIAL CONCERNS**

The one topic that continues to permeate every conversation I have about the future of Jamestown is how do we address our financial challenges. We are a city that cannot raise taxes and is handicapped by our legacy employment costs. Now, more than ever, it is imperative that we work with the City Council to solve our financial issues and find ways of raising revenues and reducing expenses. We have much work left to do, including working with our unions this year. With all collective bargaining agreements up this year, we will begin the process of negotiating and working to secure reasonable and responsible contracts with each bargaining unit. I am proud to announce the start of our healthcare advisory committee. This committee will be made up of union members, retirees, council members, and staff to evaluate our ever-rising healthcare costs and make recommendations on our healthcare partners and overhead costs.

This past year has only made our financial situation more dire. We used to be one of the only municipalities across the state that was in this fiscal stranglehold, but given COVID, many municipalities throughout New York are now saddled with enormous deficits and ever higher costs. While we work through issues locally, I will be working with the State and federal government to secure additional funding to help with the deficits that arose because of the pandemic and support to get us back on track. Local municipalities were on the front line of fighting COVID, and we must get our fair share to fully recover. If not, the consequences will be dire.

**REBUILD. REBOUND. ADAPT.**

My focus on this upcoming year is to get Jamestown to rebuild, rebound, and adapt. I am proud of my team of passionate and talented individuals that accomplished so much this year. I am pleased to see our City Council working together to get things done, despite the massive challenges the pandemic threw in our way. But, I am most humbled by the work our community has done to come together and fight COVID-19.

Now is the time we must come together to focus on rebuilding our City by focusing on our neighborhoods and small businesses. We must focus on healing the rifts that are dividing our community and country by listening empathetically to each other. For our businesses, for our churches, and for people like Madeline, who are concerned about the safety and health of their families. A brave new world is upon us, and we can either stay the course and remain stagnant, or adapt and thrive.

Respectfully Submitted,

CITY OF JAMESTOWN



EDWARD A. SUNDQUIST,  
Mayor