



STATE OF THE CITY REPORT

JAMESTOWN, NEW YORK



PRESENTED BY

Mayor Edward A. Sundquist

**JAMESTOWN CITY COUNCIL
JANUARY 27, 2020**

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**PRESENTED TO THE MEMBERS OF THE
JAMESTOWN CITY COUNCIL ON THE
27TH DAY OF JANUARY, 2020**

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

I am humbled to present the State of the City Report on the status and future of the City of Jamestown.

As the newly elected Mayor, I ask for your patience this evening as we go through my report. Lucky for all of you, I have only been on the job now 27 days, so not yet quite enough time to get myself in trouble, but more than enough to get a snapshot of our City's present state.

Many of my remarks tonight will speak about the potential for growth, the reemergence of hope, and a vision for our City's future. However, I would be remiss if I did not begin by speaking about the current fiscal reality this City faces.

It is no secret that our City, my home, is fiscally distressed. We are the only City in the State of New York that has been at its property tax cap. We are one of the few cities, where almost 40% of our assessed value is tax exempt. We are facing several lawsuits that could decimate our contingency or "rainy day" funds. Coupled with a disconnected workforce and poor employee job satisfaction, we are at a low point in this City's history.

I want to be very clear; I am not saying we are going into municipal bankruptcy or a control board. But, I am saying that if we don't plan for future development, if we don't look at other revenue models, if we just sit back and just keep this ship of a City afloat, we are one storm away from sinking.

As captain of this ship, I will not let us go down without a fight. This ship is savable, but it requires more than just the people you see up here. It requires all of us to bring new ideas to the table, to help grow our community, and to take some new risks that maybe we weren't willing to in the past.

On September 29, 1971, Governor Rockefeller came to Jamestown to dedicate this very City Hall. In a crowd of 4,000 people, he closed out his dedication speech with the following: "This new City Hall symbolizes the choice you have made for Jamestown. You have chosen initiative over complacency. You have chosen progress over decline. In many ways, this is a far different city than it was long ago. But the spirit that tamed a wilderness along Chautauqua Lake and the vision that saw the prospects for a fine community here are obviously alive and well in Jamestown today."

Jamestown has always been a community looking towards change, looking towards innovation. So, let's talk about the innovation we will see in the coming year.

IMPROVING CITY COMMUNICATIONS

As a City with 450 employees, sometimes we lack the ability to communicate effectively with our own departments, and specifically with our citizens. We have created an internal working group and have challenged our community partners to help the City be better at sharing communication and data. Many cities have integrated new technology to help departments share information and better serve residents. For example, maybe you have called the assessor's office asking about your tax bill. The assessor's office knows about your assessment values but not your taxes. The assessor's office has to go to the clerk's office to get your physical bill in order to answer your questions. Wouldn't it be great if the assessor's office (or even you) could view your tax bill online?

For another example, while our police officers have mobile computers in their vehicles which provide information on each call, our fire department does not. Imagine the City having a system where when a call comes in, our fire department could see the call from the fire truck and know instantly where the nearest fire hydrants are at? These are solutions cities across the country are implementing to better serve people.

Let's talk about better serving residents through increased emergency communication. I envision a system where the City is able to communicate emergency alerts with residents through phone, email, text messages, and social media. Even the ability to allow our citizens to sign up for messages on neighborhood activities, messages from the Mayor's office or council members, or even simple things like road closures would greatly improve the quality of life and communication to residents.

We live in a connected world, full of data. Shouldn't the City be sharing that data as well? Many cities provide portals to citizens that show how many calls for service our police did last month, or the number of leaves we picked up, or even the number of phone calls the Mayor's office receives in a week. As a City, we need to be more transparent in the work we do, which is why I am committed to working on opening up the City's data for all our citizens, partners, and community members. It's time for us to be proactive, not reactive in the work we do.

ADDRESSING PUBLIC SAFETY CONCERNS

The safety of our public is a top priority. I truly believe we have the best professional police and fire departments around, but we have neglected them for far too long. I have instructed my staff to immediately reengage in negotiations with our police and fire to see if we can come to some middle ground, for the good of our City.

In addition, I am proposing a comprehensive review of our fire operations and fire stations, many of which have become neglected over time. It is time we look to see what we need to do to improve fire safety in the City. Do we need to repair? Rebuild? Replace?

I am also asking our police and fire to be more engaged and interact more with the community they faithfully serve. Just today, the Police Chief and Deputy Fire Chief accompanied me to Love Elementary where I proclaimed this week as National Kindness Week. Kindness always matters in our community, but what mattered even more to those kids, is seeing our public safety officers showing them what kindness and friendliness looks like. We will soon be asking our officers to be a bigger part of our community, to invest in our kids and our neighbors, and give of their time to better understand the issues our community faces.

When talking about public safety, there is one large elephant in the room, Ambulance and EMS services. Back in 1996, the City was handling 50 ambulance transports a year and contracted with ALSTAR to be the primary ambulance provider for the City of Jamestown. Back then, we thought it was too much to handle. However, last year alone, our Fire Department did over 1,000 ambulance transports as ALSTAR was out of service. This doesn't even take into account the countless calls for service that brought neighboring municipalities in to assist. This is simply not sustainable for the City.

Just a few weeks ago, ALSTAR has notified the City it seeks to end its agreement for services. We are meeting with officials to better understand what ALSTAR's intentions are, but make no mistake, I WILL NOT let our citizens go without an ambulance service. We are happy to discuss our issues, but at the end of the day, my goal is to end a model that allows our contract ambulance company to NOT serve our residents. We will be putting out a request for proposal to find a service that will be our exclusive ambulance service in the City and can guarantee minimum response times and dedicated City ambulance service. When it comes to public safety, the City of Jamestown will always ensure our residents are taken care of, no matter what.

DEVELOPING OUR CITY

It is no secret that our economic development is stagnant and our housing stock is literally falling apart. In January alone, we have demolished four buildings and have a slate of additional ones to go. It is time for a new direction in our development department, and I am proud to say we have some great new individuals working to shape a better vision for the City. I have said time and time again, the City of Jamestown will become a hub for new technologies, and I am proud to say we are working towards that vision. In the first 27 days, our development department has

met with handfuls of developers looking to invest in Jamestown and has started to revamp our loan programs to focus on business start-up, sustainability, and growth. We now have a strong partnership with the Small Business Development Center and are aggressively working to partner with other organizations to improve our City's economic outlook.

One crucial component of this is housing. It is often said, it takes a village to raise a child, well it takes a City of smart and thoughtful people to deal with our housing issues. The City will be creating a community housing advisory group to bring organizations working in the housing sphere together and coordinate a plan for our City. We are looking at new laws on rental inspections to combat unsafe living conditions and fighting hand-in-hand with the County on lead abatement. And, tonight, I am proud to announce that through a grant with the New York State Attorney General, the City is hiring an associate corporation counsel whose mission is to fight housing blight in our City.

However, the biggest challenge we must face is one of our own making. If we want to be a city for the future, we must modernize our laws. We cannot be stuck in the 1980's, watching every other successful New York city pass us by. For the first time in over 15 years, I will be calling a Charter Review Commission to ensure our City's laws make us competitive and move us forward. I am also proud to announce that we will be working towards a committee to review and revitalize our antiquated zoning and codes, established back in 1969 and updated in 1998. Our society and City has changed, so should our zoning code.

MODERNIZING OUR TAX STRUCTURE

Our tax structure has remained the same for ages. It is a system that encourages our current housing issues with run-down homes and vacant lots, and discourages our residential owners from investing in their property. It is time we look at what other cities are doing to deal with taxation issues. Our goal is to lower the tax rates for the things we want to see more of: Developed properties and home improvements. We need to start taxing the things we would like to see less of: Vacant lots and dilapidated properties. I have directed our assessment office to start to run different models for taxation that will ease the residential property owners from the heavy tax burden they face. I have also started toward looking at ways to stop penalizing our home owners for making repairs, and start to phase in assessments for a longer period of time, relieving some of the tax burden to those making needed improvements to homes.

ENGAGING OUR CITIZENS

It's clear we have our challenges as a City, but despite these challenges, I am most proud of the number of citizens that have stepped forward this year to be on boards and commissions, helping to make our City great.

For the first time in a long time, this Council tonight will approve a diverse group of people to serve in positions across the City, impacting so many parts of our daily lives. When I ran for office, I said partnerships and new voices would be key...and I meant it.

Despite my warnings of our future if we stay the current path, what I see most in this City is hope. Hope that together, as one community, we can solve problems and rise above our challenges. We have much work to do this year: improving our city communication, addressing public safety concerns, redeveloping our City, and modernizing our tax structure.

I am confident that hope and action will move Jamestown forward, but we must remember what Governor Rockefeller said of the people of Jamestown 49 years ago "You have chosen initiative over complacency. You have chosen progress over decline. In many ways, this is a far different city than it was long ago."

Respectfully Submitted,

CITY OF JAMESTOWN



EDWARD A. SUNDQUIST,
Mayor