



STATE OF THE CITY ADDRESS

March 31, 2022

Introduction of Mayor Rolison provided by Councilmember Natasha Cherry

Thank you Natasha. When you and I came into office together, we faced some pretty extraordinary challenges – I want to thank you for your partnership and friendship – not just as a councilmember but also as you served on the City’s Finance Committee during those early years, for your work on the Poughkeepsie Joint Water Board, and now your work as a member of the Council’s leadership team...

Good evening everyone – and thank you for coming...

It seems much longer, but just two years ago I made the difficult decision to cancel the in-person State of the City address that was to be held right here at Changepoint on March 9, 2020 as something we were coming to know as the coronavirus – or COVID-19 - was first appearing in our country. Today, as mask mandates are removed and states of emergency are rescinded around the Country, we are all safer and less at risk of serious illness than at any time since the pandemic began.

I want to say how tremendously proud of the work city employees have done during this unprecedented period. During these extraordinary circumstances they have been resilient and they have persevered. And they are owed our gratitude.

Throughout these last two years, the city has provided the most current information available as we worked to keep residents informed about the changing nature of COVID-19. As we know, the guidance from our State and Federal partners was constantly evolving. We've disseminated that information through the city's newsletter "The Buzz," the city's website, social media, flyers, by phone and email and at public meetings and via many of our external partners.

This has truly been a team effort involving the whole of government and I'd like to recognize and thank our colleagues on the Council who are here with us tonight (*recognize individually and also recognize any former councilmembers attending*).

We also distributed federal funds tied to mitigating the effects of COVID-19 which have helped our small businesses and supported tenants who fell behind on their rent, and we've supported efforts to address food insecurity. We've worked with the county and other partners to organize pop-up vaccine and testing clinics and - more recently - we've distributed thousands of at-home test kits.

Throughout the entire crisis essential services to our community continued uninterrupted.

For all the hardship the pandemic brought – it also showed us what a strong community we are, and how much local government really does matter.

Thanks to the American Rescue Plan Act, signed into law by President Biden on March 11, 2021, we are receiving 20 Million Dollars in direct Federal aid. This is an extraordinary shot in the arm for the City of Poughkeepsie and it falls to us to make certain that these funds are allocated for use in ways that maximize community benefit, address social equity, and impact the largest number of our residents well into the future. This is by far the largest single infusion of direct federal funds the city has ever seen. I want to thank our Congressman, Sean Patrick Maloney, for tireless work on behalf of the City of Poughkeepsie.

The rules governing the use of these funds are set by the U.S. Treasury, and there are important aspects of compliance and reporting that we must manage during the

coming years. With this in mind, the City has engaged Capital Market Advisors (“CMA”), to work with us to assure our ARPA process is the best it can be. Together we have built an “ARPA WEB PORTAL” which may be accessed via the City’s website. External stakeholders, including our non-profit community, can make applications for funding for their own eligible work or projects and some tremendous and exciting initiatives have been brought forward – and others are already underway.

We’ve established an ARPA task force consisting of three members of my administration, and three members of our Common Council. The Task Force will assure that ARPA expenditures are compliant with Federal rules, and that they are approved in an open and transparent manner - based upon discussion, respectful debate and strategic priorities.

The process we’ve built around the use of these funds, as well as some of the choices we’ve already made, were recently featured in a national story by the Associated Press, which highlighted our plans to upgrade city parks, rebuild our Pulaski Pool House, renovate our Spratt Park Pool House, purchase new heavy equipment for our Sanitation Division and increase funding for youth empowerment and opportunity. At the same time, we are establishing a new Division of Youth Opportunity and Development at City Hall. These are just a few of the critical items which the American Rescue Plan Act allows us to address, and I know you are as excited as I am about the opportunities facing our city today.

In addition to infrastructure projects and capital improvements long-overdue, these Federal funds may be used for public safety, supporting our local businesses, and furthering the city’s economic development.

Speaking of youth opportunity, this spring work begins at the site of the former YMCA on Montgomery Street which will be transformed into a state-of-the-art youth center known as the “Youth Opportunity Union.” This new facility will propel the City, and the entire County, into the forefront of modern programming and support for our youth. As many of you know, this project is coming to fruition after many years of work – propelled by a commitment of more than \$25 Million Dollars by Dutchess County, and the strong support of our Common Council, it is happening

because of the work and the vision of a coalition of city stakeholders, many of whom I see here this evening.

It was several years ago now that we began these efforts. In February, 2019 the City took ownership of the former YMCA, and quickly issued a Request for Expressions of Interest in redeveloping the property. There were a number of public meetings to listen to our residents - and on May 17th of 2021 our Common Council approved the transfer of the property to the County. Today I can report to you that demolition work is scheduled to begin at the property in just a couple of months.

I can also report to you that public engagement and community outreach efforts are continuing and the YOU Advisory Committee has been established to help guide the project. You can stay up to date on the project's progress by visiting: www.the-you.org

Along with our City Council, I want to thank the Dutchess County Legislature and their Chairman Greg Pulver, for supporting this vital project and our thanks as well go to our own County legislators, Barrington Atkins, Craig Brendli, and Randy Johnson for their leadership and for all they do in service of our City. I served on the County Legislature myself for twelve years, the last six as its Chairman. It was during that time that the vision of creating a state-of-the-art youth center right here in the city first began to take shape.

I can't tell you how much those relationships and personal friendships have meant to me over the six-plus years I've served as Mayor of this City. One of those friends and champions of the City who could not be with us this evening is our County Executive, Marc Molinaro – thank you Marc for all you've done and are doing for our City.

The transformation of this blighted and long-vacant building adjacent to Eastman Park in our city's central core into a new center for youth opportunity is destined to be one of the hallmark achievements of our time in public service – and it is this type of collaboration among us that will have the greatest impact on our Community for years to come. Thank you to our friends at Mass Design and the 35 Montgomery Community Coalition, a tremendous group of city stakeholders. I also want to thank our own John Penney – from the beginning John has been the person bringing everyone together and pushing through some of the challenges that big bold projects like this always encounter.

I also want to thank someone who sadly is no longer with us. My good friend and colleague, Barbara Jeter Jackson. I wish she was with us today to see the project moving forward and how so many are working so hard to make it a reality.

Another extraordinary collaboration which is making a difference and which will have a long-lasting impact here in the City is the work of the Children’s Cabinet. Poughkeepsie City School District Superintendent Dr. Eric Rosser and I formed the Cabinet to build a shared vision and cradle-to-career agenda for child and youth development in the city. The Children’s Cabinet brings together an extraordinary group of community members, teachers, administrators, elected officials and subject matter experts to work together for the betterment of our youth. I want to thank Kylynn Grier, Rob Watson, Jr. and James Watson for their dedication and commitment to the Cabinet.

The City of Poughkeepsie is the only community in New York State outside of New York City to have a Children’s Cabinet – a model of excellence that was recently recognized by the State Board of Regents as a model for collaboration. And we should be very proud of that.

Recognize Dr. Eric Rosser – Poughkeepsie City Schools Superintendent

ERIC’s REMARKS HERE

The Children’s Cabinet has an active executive committee, facilitated partnerships to create Wi-Fi hotspots to help students in need of internet access during the COVID-19 crisis, and recently launched two citywide Working Groups – one focused on “early childhood” and one focused on “out-of-school enrichment and learning”. Both groups have just released compelling reports which recommend actions that will improve opportunities for children and families. These data-rich, insightful reports provide a roadmap for our future work and will prove invaluable as the community considers these recommendations and begins to implement them.

Apart from the many specific initiatives coming out of the Children's Cabinet, our work has seeded the strongest and most effective partnership that City government has ever had with our city's school district.

Thank you Eric.

Late last year, I was honored to join with Eric and other elected and school officials in hosting Geoffrey Canada, founder and president of the Harlem Children's Zone; Paul Reville, Faculty Director of the Education Redesign Lab (EdRedesign) at the Harvard Graduate School of Education; local youth advocates and other stakeholders to discuss the Poughkeepsie Children's Cabinet and the Youth Opportunity Union (YOU). It's truly extraordinary how the contributions and experience of *so many people* are coalescing around an urgent need in our City and the region to do more to ensure the success of our children - as well as to support the fabric of our families.

Our work together is getting noticed. We are excited about where these new partnerships will lead, about how they are helping us leverage valuable resources, follow best practices and develop comprehensive strategies which will enable us to close opportunity gaps in our neighborhoods.

Increasing youth funding, building a new youth center, institutionalizing the work of the Children's Cabinet – all this requires that city government also establish the *capacity to manage, deliver and sustain* these new community benefits. Performance metrics and data-driven decision making are the building blocks for success, and so - with the approval of our Common Council last fall, we created a new Division of Youth Opportunity and Development at City Hall.

As we work to recruit the first leader of our new Youth Division, we have already announced the availability of a new wave of youth grants that are being made available to our non-profit partners working with or providing programming for our children. In the four years since we first announced the establishment of the Youth Grant Program, we've been able to help more than thirty local organizations provide programs for our city.

Last month I announced the appointment of our planning director, Natalie Quinn, as our new Development Director – congratulations Natalie.

Like all our departments at city hall, our development team is working on a number of important projects. We just released an in-depth report, authored by our partners at *Pattern for Progress*, on access to and availability of housing in the City of Poughkeepsie. This report is also available on our website and at the Poughkeepsie Public Library. It looks at our current situation, likely future trends, and arrives at important recommendations on what the City can do to address the growing challenge of housing affordability. Housing availability is a real challenge in the City today. In order to make good decisions you need good data, and that's why this study was so important.

The Development Department is also working closely with the Common Council to finalize the update to our Local Waterfront Revitalization Plan. The LWRP is a planning and policy document which hasn't been updated in two decades. I am hopeful that this work may be brought to a successful conclusion this spring and that the Council will formally adopt the plan over the next couple of months.

We are also in the stretch run of our work to update the City's Comprehensive Plan and modernize our zoning code. The city's Comprehensive Plan was last updated in 1998, and it's been over 40 years since the City's zoning ordinance was comprehensively reviewed and updated.

Among other things, the work to update our Comprehensive Plan involves capturing and crystalizing the community's collective vision for future growth and development in the city. The ambitious, multi-faceted process includes the formation of a Project Steering Committee, meetings with the Common Council and city staff and the implementation of a robust public engagement strategy. I want to thank our consultant team at CZB LLC, and their partners Ingalls Planning & Design for what promises to be a really strong and valuable end product.

The former YMCA building isn't the only blighted property scheduled for demolition this spring. As I mentioned, the city is expending some \$4 Million Dollars on parks upgrades and close to \$2 Million to upgrade our two pool houses. While the Spratt Park Pool House is in line for a major renovation, our Pulaski Pool House is a complete tear down, and will be replaced with a completely redesigned

structure which was the choice identified during the public engagement we conducted there last summer with the help of Nubian Directions. Our pools are visited thousands of times each season and it's true that these pool houses have themselves become a symbol of decay in the city which resulted from years of deferred maintenance caused by all the fiscal challenges the city has had. This will be the largest investment in our parks and pools in the city's history, and will have a transformative effect that uplifts the entire city. New benches, grills, garbage cans and new signage, resurfaced tennis and basketball courts and - thanks to a grant from the Dyson Foundation - new lighting at Stitzel Field and Spratt Park.

At Pershing Park and Malcolm X Park, American Rescue Plan funding, a generous grant from Scenic Hudson, and a half million dollar grant from New York State's Environmental Facilities Corporation, are funding the re-imagination of public space on the city's Northside that is long overdue. I want to thank former Director of New York State Parks, Rose Harvey, and her firm New City Parks, for their incredible design work.... and we thank Scenic Hudson also for their planning assistance and we thank the EFC for their strong financial support - and thank you to everyone who participated in the public engagement that's been conducted around these projects.

We are very fortunate to have so many municipal parks throughout the city and, through our "PKGO-Parks Plan," we will focus on rebuilding and replacing aging equipment in all parts of the City. I'd like to acknowledge and thank the McCann Foundation for their generous donation of the new playground at Spratt. There are a number of community groups and volunteers who have helped with upgrades and with community cleanups and who champion individual parks. I also want to thank our State Senator, Sue Serino who has been actively involved in our Parks Initiative since 2016.

We know that having the financial resources to upgrade our parks is only part of the story, we also have to improve our maintenance and care for our parks, and we need to activate our parks not only with recreational activities, but also with arts and culture. As we continue to move beyond COVID, we look forward to more public events in the city, and from College Hill Park to Waryas and Kaal Rock, this summer promises many special events. It's vital that the City redouble its commitment to the arts, help our arts community grow and attract new and exciting arts entities to the City of Poughkeepsie. Imagine work that might seed a new theater company, imagine city-sponsored performance art that ties directly to our work supporting our Children, and imagine arts as just one more area of strong collaboration between city government and our school district. These are just a few of our goals and there is

work going on throughout the city right now to make these things and more a reality. I want to thank all our arts groups, our local artists, and those who support them, as well as our own Public Arts Commission and its chairman, Jeff Aman. Making our city a true arts destination takes work, it takes strategic planning, and it takes funding, and over the next several weeks we will be announcing several exciting plans to enlarge our city's arts presence in the region and the State.

Every aspect of city government, everything we do and everything we hope and plan to do, ties directly to the financial condition of the City. From the very beginning of my service as your Mayor, one of our chief objectives has been to resolve the city's general fund deficit – a deficit which stood at \$13.2 Million dollars when I took office in January of 2016. Largely as a result of that deficit, MOODY's downgraded the city, and our bond rating slipped to below investment grade.

Our steady progress towards eliminating the deficit was interrupted in 2020 as a result of the pandemic, but this evening I can report to you that our preliminary results for 2021 reflect nearly a \$1.2 Million dollar surplus (*applause*).

Subject to confirmation as part of our annual audit process, this surplus will reduce our remaining deficit to about \$6.4 Million – the lowest number since I took office.

The city's deficit reduction plan was first launched back in 2016 by then Finance Commissioner Marc Nelson, who worked with former Finance Commissioner Bill Brady, and the New York State Financial Restructuring Board, as well as our outside consultants at Capital Market Advisors and our external auditors to limit borrowings and save money by making government more efficient. Since the city's first formal Debt Management Plan was established and adopted by the Common Council back in 2017, the city has sharply curtailed its debt service costs relative to its total budget, consolidated its transit system with Dutchess County and hired Veolia USA to manage our water and sewer facilities.

All these steps, together with careful budgeting each year, have had a profound and positive impact on city finances - but it gets better.

This past week our Common Council approved an amendment of our Sales Tax Agreement with Dutchess County and the City of Beacon. This agreement, which governs the distribution of sales tax revenues received by the County, provides for about a \$2.4 Million dollar a year increase in the city's share, based on current projections.

As has been recently reported, the new ten-year agreement, has been approved by our council and the Beacon city council, and now moves to the County Legislature for approval.

The expiration of the former agreement in 2023 set the stage for discussions with the County about how a more equitable distribution formula was essential, not just for the City of Poughkeepsie, but for the entire County.

This new ten year agreement not only increases the city's anticipated annual revenue by about \$2.4 Million a year, but it also allows for an initial payment of \$3 Million to be made this year – a payment which the City will apply to further reduce our deficit this year. The increase in annual sale tax revenue will also decrease the percentage of the city's total annual revenue which is derived from property taxes, and that metric is one of the most important indicators of a city's financial condition.

Through the months of work involved in negotiating this important agreement, we worked with City of Beacon Mayor Lee Kyracou, and their city administrator, Chris White. This is just one more example of how collaboration and working together will always produce better outcomes than trying to go it alone.

Let me take a moment to thank our Commissioner of Finance, Dr. Brian Martinez and his team in the Finance Department. Brian – thank you. Brian has put a great team together – including Jen George at RBT Accounting, our auditors, and James Nytko, Managing Director at Capital Market Advisors (*applause*).

We really do have an extraordinary finance team and over the next eighteen months we will continue our mission to eliminate the deficit and regain our investment grade bond rating.

After then-Gov. Andrew Cuomo called on municipalities with police departments to address police reform and put forward new recommendations and polices, governments with police agencies had to adopt a plan by April 1, 2021, to be eligible for future state funding, and we decidedly achieved that goal.

Working with a large group of stakeholders, the city developed a comprehensive Police Reform and Modernization Plan which is available for review on the City's new website.

I want to thank the city's Procedural Justice Committee for its help in crafting the response. The committee held meetings, created a website to keep the public up to date and to obtain more public input and then made initial recommendations.

I also want to thank Police Chief Tom Pape and Captain Rich Wilson for their leadership and work on the plan, which included the city entering into an inter-municipal agreement with Dutchess County to have the city's Police Department conduct Procedural Justice and Implicit Bias training to aid other municipalities in answering the governor's executive order. Our City is no stranger to being out in front and, as a former police officer myself, I am particularly proud of the work we've done and continue to do.

The city's plan not only met but exceeded the requirements contained in the Governor's Executive Order on police reform. I am proud to report our initiatives have strengthened the Police Department while improving our diversity ranks. Our Police Department led efforts to have the Dutchess County Department of Human Resources alter requirements of candidates applying for and taking the countywide police entrance exam. These changes now require a candidate to possess a high school diploma or equivalency -- but not 60 college credits *initially*. Yet, recognizing the importance of an education, the city will pay for part of an officer's higher education costs as he or she ultimately is required to fulfill that commitment. The more rigid college requirements had long been cited by community members as an impediment to hiring more city candidates -- so this has been, indeed, a welcome change.

As part of our recruitment strategy, our police officers also assist city residents taking part in the Police Officer/Deputy Sheriff Exam and are guiding our local residents through all aspects of the process, including helping them train for the agility exam. Based on our most recent hirings, I can say these new approaches are working.

We are also directly addressing issues that police officers encounter all too often on our streets – specifically, people struggling with mental illnesses or homelessness.

We have formed partnerships with Mental Health America of Dutchess County and Hudson River Housing and have done so in innovative ways, by using some of our COVID relief money. We bolstered our mental-health services and added services provided by Hudson River Housing to assist people with housing needs. These initiatives enable the service providers to partner with police officers on certain shifts to broaden our response and to aid those in need. We know that having experts in these fields working so closely with the Police Department is a more effective response strategy because it addresses root causes and will deliver better outcomes. These partners are working closely with the Police Department's Behavioral Evaluation and Assistance Team, and I thank all those involved in this concerted, comprehensive and innovative effort and I specifically want to acknowledge Lynwood Burke who is our Intensive Case Manager on staff at the police department who is a member of the team at Mental Health America. Because of this initiative we have had hundreds of interactions with individuals in need.

Taking guns off the street is one of the most important things we can do to improve public safety in our city. Over the last year, through a program and funding provided by Attorney General Leticia James, our PD took more than sixty guns off the streets. Thank you to the men and women of our police department – we appreciate all you do every day, and you have the support of a community that truly values what you do. And, right now, the job of a police officer is more challenging and dangerous than ever. I want you to know that you have my personal gratitude and unwavering support for the job that you do keeping this city safe. I also want to thank you for embracing reform and modernization and I want to thank the Police Benevolent Association – the PBA – for their collaboration and partnership.

I also want to announce this evening that the City is purchasing new audio and camera technology which will improve police response times and aid in solving crimes. This is a system manufactured by FLOCK SAFETY SYSTEMS which is based on recognizing sounds associated with certain types of crimes, from gun-shots to screeching tires. The system leverages available data in real time, with direct feeds to our public safety dispatchers. When a crime is being committed, seconds matter.

A special thank you to our Assemblyman Jonathan Jacobson who is helping our police department upgrade our technology.

While we're talking about public safety, I want to acknowledge the incredible work done by our City Fire Department. As first responders, our fire fighters responded within minutes to more than 4,682 calls for service, of which more than 2,400 were for emergency medical response.

I want to take a moment to thank former Fire Chief Mark Johnson for his 36 years of service to the City. Chief Johnson led the best Fire Department in the State and we wish him well in retirement.

Our Fire Department is now led by Acting Chief Joe Franco – thank you Joe for stepping up to this important work. Working with our Fire Union and the City Administrator, Joe is overseeing the purchase of new fire-fighting gear for every city firefighter by the end of next year, a replacement project that allocates more than \$400,000 in federal ARPA funds to ensuring our firefighters have the best when it comes to the resources they need to keep our community safe. Thank you Joe.

Speaking of retirements, we've had a number of city employees retire this year after decades of service. I want to recognize George Shaw who recently retired from our Department of Public Works after 46 years serving our community – Thank you George, and thank you to our entire Department of Public Works team.

This is my seventh State of the City address. Each year I've highlighted some of our key accomplishments, and laid out our vision for the priorities and objectives that we face in the moment. Through the years we have steadily worked to resolve that \$13.2 Million Dollar deficit the City faced at the beginning of 2016, and we have steadily worked towards resolving long-standing controversies surrounding various development proposals. We've worked together to get through a global pandemic, and on some of the most important issues of our time.

For a city which has been designated by the Office of the State Comptroller one of the most fiscally stressed cities in the State, we sure have accomplished a great deal.

For my part, none of this would be possible without the love and support of my wife Lori. Lori, thank you (and that's a thank you not only from me, but from everyone who knows and understands what it is to serve).

In a little less than two years now, my time serving as your Mayor will come to an end. It is my great honor, and I am very proud, to serve you in that capacity. As we take stock of the better place our city is in today than in years past, I want to ask for your continued support for the work still left to do.

Thank you and God Bless the City of Poughkeepsie.