



OFFICE OF THE MAYOR

MAYOR BEN WALSH

February 15, 2023

Hon. Helene E. Weinstein, Chair
Assembly Ways and Means Committee
Hon. Liz Krueger, Chair
Senate Finance Committee

Good afternoon,

Thank you, Chair Weinstein, Chair Krueger and the members of the Legislative Fiscal Committees, for inviting me to these joint hearings to discuss the State Budget. It is an honor to be here and a pleasure to be back with you in person this year.

At the time of my first visit to the Committees in 2018, the City of Syracuse faced a starkly different environment. The City's fiscal condition was perilous, and most people saw Syracuse as a municipality slipping toward bankruptcy. Through smart strategy, hard choices, good fortune and the strong support of our local, state and federal partners, I'm pleased to report that those days are in our rearview mirror. Syracuse is on a path to fiscal sustainability. Our population is growing again. And Micron's commitment to New York means the largest economic investment in the nation's history is coming to our region.

I am grateful to this Legislature for its support at each stage of Syracuse's journey. Throughout my five years as Mayor, New York State has been a reliable partner to Syracuse. I am particularly appreciative of the members of our local delegation, Senator Rachel May, Senator John Mannion, Assemblyman Bill Magnarelli, Assemblywoman Pam Hunter, and Assemblyman Al Stirpe.

As Syracuse embarks on an era of growth, we face new and different challenges. Without proper investment and effective policy, the shortage of quality affordable housing we have faced will only magnify. Inequities in opportunity that have plagued us for decades will widen, subjecting even more children, families and seniors to poverty. The condition of our ailing infrastructure will further decline. And while our fiscal status has improved, it will backslide unless the structural deficit Syracuse and other New York cities face is corrected.

In these times, Syracuse needs its strong partnership with New York State as much as ever.

FY24 Executive Budget

We welcomed much-needed investments included in Governor Hochul's Executive Budget for the City of Syracuse. Funding for job readiness through Syracuse Build, our

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construction careers program, and Syracuse Surge, our strategy for inclusive growth in the New Economy, will help to break cycles of poverty. State money for a revolving loan fund for small businesses and flexible financing for mixed-income development will strengthen housing and our economy. And the Governor's pledge of funding for the construction of public housing will lift up a neighborhood that has suffered injustice and disinvestment. Respectfully, I urge the Legislature to enact these provisions.

I applaud Governor Hochul's commitment to build 800,000 units of new housing in New York State in the next ten years. Syracuse and Onondaga County must be home to tens of thousands of those units to meet the demand we are expecting in our community. I encourage the Legislature to listen to your local leaders and to work with the Administration to involve all municipal governments – urban, suburban, and rural – in meeting the need we face for quality, affordable housing.

Next Level Growth

In my annual State of the City address three weeks ago, I said that Syracuse's great calling now is to achieve "Next Level Growth" – to ensure that our decisions and actions in the pivotal months and years before us create sustainable growth and opportunity for all. We can and must achieve growth that is inclusive, intentionally creating opportunity for women, people of color, veterans, the LGBTQ+ community and others historically left behind.

Today, I ask for New York State's assistance in critical areas that will help us achieve Next Level Growth: violence interruption, housing, transportation, infrastructure and city finances.

Violence Interruption

In cities all over the state and country, crime is a topic of grave concern. The COVID-19 pandemic created economic disruption and mental health crises that contribute to rising crime rates. Syracuse ended 2022 with overall crime up 10%, largely driven by an increase in property crime. Violent crime rose at a lesser rate – 3%. Homicides, which have the most devastating and lasting consequences on families and society, by the grace of God, fell by 38%.

Yet any hope for an extended reprieve from lives lost to violence has quickly faded following three homicides already this year. This included the heart-wrenching murder of Brexiale Torres-Ortiz, an 11-year-old girl who was killed in a drive-by shooting on a Sunday evening as she walked home from a neighborhood store. Three teenage boys have been arrested for the crime.

Our community continues to grieve the loss of Brexi and to find ways to stop the killing. Last year, I started Syracuse's first Mayor's Office to Reduce Gun Violence. The office regularly convenes the individuals and organizations engaged in violence interruption, and they are working with a new level of coordination, cooperation and partnership.

Based on their input, we have released a new Community Violence Intervention plan and will begin implementing it this year. It will go after the leading cause of deadly violence in Syracuse: conflicts between gangs and groups of young people. The office will focus on four major contributing factors: entrenched cognitive and behavioral conditions; school absenteeism and limited career opportunity; high poverty levels; and lack of mental health support. There will be counseling, conflict management, mentoring, and job and school reentry programs. Through the coordinated efforts of our community violence intervention partners, we will find an enduring path to peace on our streets.

Neighborhood street cameras, or COPS cameras, are essential to public safety. The equipment aids in response to emergencies and plays a key role in virtually all major criminal investigations and successful arrests in the city. Our constituents and our police are in full agreement: we need to expand the network of cameras in our city to increase neighborhood safety and bring more violent perpetrators to justice.

Our Legislative and Funding Priorities agenda for this year seeks funding for these and other crime reduction programs. I urge the Legislature to commit resources to these immediate and long-term intervention efforts.

Housing

Syracuse and other cities across New York have long faced a crisis-level shortage of affordable housing. The upheaval of the pandemic worsened conditions. In Syracuse, we can now foresee an even more consequential housing development: spiking demand in response to unprecedented economic growth anticipated in the years ahead.

Our signature neighborhood revitalization program, the Resurgent Neighborhoods Initiative, launched in 2019, has given Syracuse a head start in being prepared for what is coming. There are currently 84 units of new construction, owner occupied single and two-family houses completed or underway. We have 24 more “shovel-ready” sites identified for construction this year and next.

With funding included in the Governor’s Executive Budget for the New 15th Ward, the Syracuse Housing Authority can begin the first phase of redeveloping its aging public housing near the south side of Syracuse with energy efficient, quality new public housing and mixed-income development.

These actions will help address the immense housing challenges and opportunities we face, but they will not be enough. So we are creating a new tool – the Syracuse Housing Trust Fund – to begin to close this gap for city residents in three ways. It will support home repair and improvement; expand flexible financing for homeowners; and increase mixed-income development to deconcentrate poverty. The Housing Trust Fund will be centered on equity to confront discriminatory practices of the past. We expect funding in the Governor’s Executive Budget will help seed the new fund, but we will also need the help of the Legislature and our federal partners to establish a sustainable funding stream.

Infrastructure

Syracuse is working to have the right infrastructure to manage and respond to growth. Today, I will report to you about efforts in traffic safety and traditional infrastructure like water pipes, sewers, and roads.

Since becoming Mayor, my team and I have been on a relentless push to make Syracuse a safer place for pedestrians, bicyclists and drivers. We launched the City's first sidewalk snow removal program and began a municipal sidewalk maintenance program. We're also piloting new traffic calming measures, including speed humps, speed cushions, and reduced lane widths to slow traffic and increase safety on our streets. While much progress has been made, we still have a long way to go.

A few weeks ago, I announced Syracuse's goal to become a Vision Zero city. Vision Zero is a strategy to eliminate all traffic fatalities and severe injuries while increasing safe, healthy, and equitable mobility for all. As a first step, we will bring legislation to the State Legislature this session to introduce Speed Cameras and Red-light cameras in school zones. Using legislation this body already authorized, we will also move ahead with bus stop arm cameras in Syracuse in coordination with the Syracuse City School District.

I want to commend the Legislature on two road infrastructure programs that have been instrumental to our success in improving the condition of Syracuse streets. The State Touring Routes and Pave Our Potholes programs provide vital funding to Syracuse and have helped us consistently more than quadruple the miles of roads we reconstruct compared to when I took office. Funding for these programs, which are in the Governor's Budget, should be increased in the upcoming spending plan.

On a bigger scale, the Legislature previously approved more than \$1 billion in funding for the first phases of construction of the Interstate 81 Viaduct project. Once the current legal challenge is resolved, the Community Grid will improve transportation in Syracuse and Central New York, strengthen the City, and create thousands of good paying jobs.

It provides another opportunity. Like many upstate cities, most of our water pipes and sewer lines are a century or more old. The 81 project will replace the underground infrastructure directly under the highway. Construction will likely weaken the adjacent old pipes, so while the project is happening, I want to fix as much nearby as we can. We estimate there is about \$130 million in "dig once" infrastructure we could get done in coordination with the 81 project. My team will be going after every possible source of funding to make sure this once in a generation opportunity to invest in infrastructure isn't squandered.

Fiscal Condition

Before closing, I want to revisit the financial condition of Syracuse. City government continues its journey to fiscal sustainability. Sales tax revenue has continued to grow – up 7% in the first few months of our current fiscal year. Economic growth is finally raising property tax revenue without raising the

local tax rate. We have not turned the corner yet, however, as our operating costs still outpace annual revenue. We need a continued partnership with New York State as we continue to work toward sustainability.

An essential source of revenue to Syracuse is New York State Aid and Incentives to Municipalities – AIM funding. I am grateful for the Legislature’s consistent support for AIM funding. For 14 years, though, it has remained at the same level despite ever rising costs. During that same time period, the State has offset growing costs to schools with about a \$6 billion increase in education aid. Local governments also need regular adjustments in state aid to enable adequate funding for public safety, housing, and services to residents. Regrettably, the Executive Budget did not include an increase in AIM. Respectfully, I ask the Legislature to change this aspect of the Governor’s plan and include a long overdue increase in aid to municipalities.

In 2018, we set a vision for Syracuse to be a growing city that embraces diversity and creates opportunity for all. As I’ve described today, we are making progress on that journey, but we have not yet gotten all the way there. On behalf of the people of Syracuse, I thank the State Legislature for its assistance, and I ask for your continued support in the fiscal year ahead and beyond.

Sincerely,



Ben Walsh
Mayor

cc: Hon. Rachel May
Hon. John Mannion
Hon. William Magnarelli
Hon. Pamela Hunter
Hon. Al Stirpe