

State of the City 2017

It is always a pleasure to update this organization and an honor to be surrounded by so many who represent the very core of what makes our city great.

We call these speeches “the State of the City.”

To me, that really means the State of Our People.

Because it’s the 120,000 of us.....living in our neighborhoods that make this great city we call Allentown.

There is a great quote from William Shakespeare which states: “What is the City but the People?”

Indeed, Allentown, like all great cities, succeeds because of the character, commitment and collaboration of its people.

So this morning – I say thank you.

Thank you for your help,

Thank you for your collaboration,

Thank you for your service and assistance in helping to rebuild this great city.

We are experiencing this great resurgence because so many ...in this room.....are working together to change this city for the better.

Thank you.

Cities are where "the action is"....

- They’re where economies are built.
- They’re where the opportunities are.
- They’re where the arts thrive.
- They’re where we find solutions and they’re where we touch people’s lives.

Last year I spoke about: What makes a city...

What makes a good city...a livable city...

What makes a city great?

This morning, I want to explore a variation on that theme.

Jamie Lerner...a renowned Brazilian [architect](#) and [urban planner](#) stated...

A city grows like an organism. It is a structure of living and working together a mix of functions.

Just like our own bodies....Cities are like living breathing organisms...ever changing, ever growing, ever evolving.

And just like our bodies...every part...our hands, our fingers, our heart, our brain, our hair... (ok, maybe not our hair) ...

But you get the idea...all are important for the body to function correctly.

So....what makes a Healthy City – what makes a strong and healthy Allentown???

A community that, because of its attributes, exudes livability; a community with a vibrant heartbeat, strong circulatory system, an active brain, sturdy muscles, radiant skin and an enduring soul.

Well let's start with the most important part of the body.....the heart.

THE HEART OF THE CITY – IS OUR DOWNTOWN

Just as our own hearts are central to life and vitality, downtown – the heart of Allentown – generates vibrancy, strength and energy.

For many years Allentown's heart was failing...no jobs, no growth, no development.

That ailing heart impacted the entire city.

No matter what we did, no matter how much we accomplished on the West End or South Side ...

Allentown was judged based on the health and vitality of its urban core...its heart.

So my first and foremost task was to conduct some radical heart surgery.

It worked....

Over a billion dollars of new investment...

Projects like the Arena, office buildings, apartments, the new restaurants, retail, a new luxury hotel.....have become the catalysts of a new era.....

A million square feet of new office space

Over 20 new eateries

New Housing.

New parking, new open space.

A new beginning, A NEW HEART if you will for Allentown.

These projects are drawing people to the Lehigh Valley and back into... the heart of the city.

They are providing economic development opportunities and they are creating jobs.

1,800 total new jobs in our downtown....64% of them filled by Allentown residents...Creating a combined estimated economic impact of more than \$87.5 million.

In just three years ...our unemployment rate went down six points from 13.5% to 6.8%...that is lower than when I came into office in January 2006.

This is what's making Allentown a model for redevelopment for cities across the commonwealth and across the country to emulate.

And there is more to come...

In 2016 we saw a new addition to our skyline with the completion of Butz phase III.

This year we will see the completion of Strata II and III, adding 138 new units of housing to our downtown and another new addition to our skyline with the completion of Tower Six.

The City recently received an \$85,000 grant from the state to complete a master plan for a new Central Park at the city's former incinerator site.

The park which is located directly in the center of the city, will become a hub connecting all of the city's trail networks, provide trails for walking and biking and open new opportunities for residential development in our urban core.

Through all of these projects the heart of Allentown is once again becoming healthy and is indeed getting stronger all the time.

But there is more to the body than just the heart...

If the Downtown is our heart, then our neighborhoods are the veins and arteries that lead to that heart.

The lifeblood of our city...its history and its culture...is found in our neighborhoods.

Many people told me that I had to choose between Downtown development and neighborhood development.

They said that there was no way that you can do both...but, I believed we could...and we have.

Livability in our neighborhoods means parks and open space. So we built new parks and play lots like the one on Fifth Street and renovated older ones like Jackson Street and Keck Park.

This year we will complete the renovation of Stevens Park and start renovating Valania and Franklin Park.

We will construct the city's first skate park in Jordan Park and a new dog park on the city's South Side.

For so many in Allentown, nothing is more important than being able to live in the neighborhood they love.

That's why we have focused on our housing stock and revitalizing our neighborhood commercial corridors.

Since I took office:

- 2200 owner-occupied properties were inspected to ensure health and safety
- Over 300 low/moderate income owner-occupied properties were rehabilitated
- 111 low/moderate income owner-occupied households had hazards which were detrimental to health and safety (i.e. broken heating systems, roofs) were repaired
- 276 low/moderate income owner-occupied properties had their facades improved
- Over 990 low/moderate income persons interested in becoming homeowners were provided counseling
- Over 300 low/moderate income households received closing cost assistance enabling them to become homeowners

We committed millions to improving the neighborhood retail streetscapes in the 19th Street corridor, Seventh Street and around the fairgrounds providing new lighting, sidewalks, crosswalks, decorative fencing and façade grants.

This year we will begin focusing our efforts on the city's other major commercial arteries (South 4th street, Hanover Avenue and Union Blvd) with new programs for business attraction and retention.

I hear frequently from constituents a desire, not just for quality housing, but affordable housing.

In this city, affordable housing should not be a privilege ...it should be a right.

We need to make urgent short-term fixes — and implement long-term solutions.

To do that we will launch the most ambitious municipal affordable housing plan in the history of this city.

In the months ahead, we'll be establishing a new office, the Office of HOPE – which stands for Housing and Opportunities for People Everywhere.

This new office will harness and marshal our resources, our talent and our determination. Through this office we will bring a coordinated and comprehensive approach to the policies, programs and projects that will impact our city's housing affordability.

We will knockdown silos, refocus our city agencies and create a unified and forceful effort to help those who need a home, find a home.

It's pretty simple: If we're building luxury apartments, we also need to build homes for middle-class families ... and apartments that working Allentownians can afford.

Our new plan will increase the number of affordable units that we build and preserve every year.

We will provide new home ownership opportunities that gives families a foundation to build equity, build wealth and frankly, to build a life.

We will strive to create urban environments that foster healthy and active aging like the Sacred Heart Senior apartments on Fifth and Turner; 61 affordable senior housing apartments built atop about 6,000 square feet of commercial space housing medical services like physical therapy, geriatric services and a lab for blood work designed to help seniors age in place in their communities.

Our neighborhoods also draw our strength from diversity.

We are a diverse city, a city of many people and cultures.

And our city is stronger when all of us come together, rather than live apart.

With this in mind we have created a new Cultural Community Center at Alliance Hall located at Sixth and Chew streets.

Seven Allentown cultural groups will be taking-up residency in the new center.

The Jamaican Cultural Organization, Liberian Community Association of Northeastern Pennsylvania, PuertoRican Cultural Preservation Inc., Mexican Cultural Association, Dominican Cultural Organization, Indian American Association of the Lehigh Valley and Kenyan Community of the North East will locate their offices in the building.

Today, these groups have no place to call their own.

They are meeting in household kitchens and living rooms across the city.

At Alliance Hall they will each have small office space and access to a second floor commercial kitchen area where they can hold small events and joint meetings.

There is great synergy in bringing these groups together and will help enhance our reputation as a city where everyone is respected.

Allentownians deserve strong neighborhoods.

Neighborhoods that become stronger as the world keeps progressing into the 21st century.
Neighborhoods that lift UP their people and in doing so lift up the whole city.

Neighborhoods that are great in their own right and together—TOGETHER—unite us as a 21st century city of fairness, opportunity, and innovation.

These are the things that together we will strive to achieve in the year ahead.

So we have our city's heart, our downtown.

Our veins and arteries...our neighborhoods.

Next is OUR CIRCULATION SYSTEM...Transportation

Like our bodies' bloodstream, good circulation is essential to a healthy city.

Our streets are the lifeline of our City; circulation for vehicles, bikes, pedestrians and transit will enable Allentown to be a model for our region, state and nation.

One of the most valuable assets in a city is its road space...a network of streets connecting our great civic spaces, institutions, businesses and parks.

Over the last ten years we rebuilt numerous bridges, Eighth Street, 15th Street, Union and the South Albert Street Bridge.

After 50 years of talk, we completed the American Parkway Bridge and this year will start the renovation of the Tilghman Street Bridge.

Our great public works and streets department paved over 75 miles of road (that the distance from here to Wilmington DE) and repaired over 113,462 potholes.

In 2017, we'll pedal forward.

Allentown and the APA are working together to launch a unique bike share program. It will be the first of its kind, in the Lehigh valley.

The program will include a network of bike share stations, stocked with bikes available for checkout, day or night, seven days a week.

All...these infrastructure improvements will provide benefits for decades to come and make our great city, even better.

NEXT.....THE BACKBONE OF OUR CITY...Our City Government

City services are the spine that connects everything together.

We have striven to make government work for you, not against you...we did this by:

- Rebuilding our finances (turning deficits into surplus)
- Improving our bond rating from a B- to an A+
- Using an innovative approach to fully fund our Pensions (something no other city in the state or maybe even the country has accomplished...we won a national award for our creativity and ingenuity...Reducing our annual pension contribution by over \$8 million dollars a year as recently reported by the state Auditor General

Eliminated the Per Capita Tax

And again in 2017 the citizens of Allentown will be seeing their twelfth straight year of no property tax increases, thus providing predictability in our tax base.

Last year our Delinquent tax collection exceeded \$2.25 million (only \$22,000 short of all-time annual record).

This year we are going to improve options for making payments to the City electronically and begin a process of developing the first 311 center in the region.

This new 311 center will be a centralized call center to handle non-emergency concerns from city residents.

It will have full-time operators who will take calls and dispatch city employees for issues related to health, building standards, streets, snow removal and more.

Currently, each department has its own operator, and the burden is on city residents to figure out which department to call based on phone numbers on the city's website.

The consolidated center will have cross-trained operators who will know how to handle all kinds of city complaints and direct staff from the necessary department. Callers will then receive a follow-up call or email to tell them how their issue has been handled.

The 311 system will make city government more responsive and accountable to Allentown citizens.

Everyone wins when government and community work hand-in-hand.

THE SKIN – THE PHYSICAL APPEARANCE AND SETTING OF OUR CITY

We can never forget that our skin, our outward appearance and assets, do much to make Allentown special.

We have focused numerous resources on improving the appearance of our city.

From street scraping projects, increased Sweep enforcement to blight remediation and Recycling.

We extended the reach of the Clean Team...A program we helped to start with the Rescue Mission several years ago to utilize formally homeless men to help clean our communities and assist them in re-entering the workplace.

We recently switched to Single Stream recycling and in three months realized a 23.8% increase in recycling overall.

The City benefited from \$600,000 in reduced collection costs and avoided \$50,000 in landfill costs for the increased recycling.

We introduced a Recyclebank program as an incentive for residents to receive coupons and rewards for recycling.

Over 3,068 residents signed up within the first few months of starting the incentive program.

Our goal is to increase recycling in our city by 15% in 2017.

All of the trash trucks in the city now run on Compressed Natural Gas....reducing our carbon footprint and make a more livable city for everyone to enjoy.

THE BRAIN – EDUCATION, ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND INNOVATION

Great cities are smart, innovative and entrepreneurial. It takes brainpower to achieve success as a thriving, livable city.

Allentown's brainpower is fed by our education resources and the innovation and entrepreneurship of our people.

A solid public education system is essential to the brainpower and to the economic success and livability of our City.

A sound public education is the most sensible economic development investment we can make as a community, and is the most powerful tool for providing children life choices and economic opportunities.

We need schools that embrace our City's changing demographics, and also recognize there is much to do to address challenging graduation rates and ensure that all students are college and career-ready.

We know that when you plant the seed of college early ... when you help kids secure internships in high school ... when you show young people the pathway toward career success ... it inspires them to do better. It incentivizes them to graduate. It helps academic achievement soar.

For the past several years we have been working with Lehigh Carbon Community College to implement the Allentown Promise which will provide a free two year degree to every Allentown student who graduates from high school.

Under the leadership of Ann Bieber...LCCC's president...we have worked to secure \$500,000 from the Stabler Foundation to help establish the Allentown Promise endowment.

We still have a ways to go to make this program a reality...but we are well on our way to achieving this goal.

Now that we've examined the City's heart, circulation system, backbone and its brain, we turn our attention to Allentown's muscle.

THE POLICE – THE MUSCLE OF OUR CITY

Safer streets come from stronger bonds between police and community.

In everything we do, we want you the citizen to know that you are part of the equation in making these initiatives a success....and that's how we build trust...by foremost understanding that trust

is not something that is given...but something that is earned.

Since I've been mayor, one of my major goals has been to improve the level of trust between the Police Department and the community it serves.

Under the leadership of Police Chief Keith Morris....

- Reinstated the Civilian Police Academy which gives citizens a firsthand look at law enforcement.
- Created the Cops Meet Block program bringing officers into neighborhoods to meet with residents and youth.
- Formed the Chief's Youth Advisory panels through a partnership with the Allentown School District, which allows students to speak to and ask questions of the chief and the officers that work in their school.
- Created the committee to review hiring standards in an effort to have the police department mirror our community.
- Hosted a series of Town Hall meetings to open the lines of communications between police and community.
- Secured a \$30,000 grant to work with the Bradbury/Sullivan Center and develop a national training model on police relations with the LGBTQ community.

We also expanded our network to surpass 175 city-wide surveillance cameras.

Expanded crime analytics software into police cars so that officers can work smarter and be more effective.

Fully implemented a Naloxone program to save lives of those who have overdosed on drugs.

This year will see the creation of a high-tech, virtual training room at our police academy that will provide our officers with the most realistic, yet safe, training methods available.

As a result of all these efforts by our police, Allentown is becoming a much safer city.

Ten straight years of consistent crime reduction....

A 48% reduction in Part one crimes

52% decrease in burglaries

28% decrease in Robberies

Homicides were flat and, all-in-all, would have to draw some pretty positive conclusions.

However, we all know there is more to this story.

The good numbers on paper don't necessarily transfer into a completely positive reality.

While the stats are good overall, the culture of violence – and particularly gun violence that is impacting our city – is anything but good.

The increase in illegal guns on our streets, combined with the willingness of people to use them, has shown itself to be a deadly recipe... One that we cannot and will not tolerate.

As mayor, I can honestly say that the lack of respect for one another, the overall willingness to settle disputes through gun violence, keeps me up at night.

I dread the 2, 3, 4 o'clock in the morning calls because I know it's not good news.

I know a family has just lost a loved one to this culture of violence and no matter how hard they cry...he or she will not be coming back.

I also know that whomever committed this unspeakable offense will be held accountable.

I can assure the families of this city who have lost a loved one that we will not stop until the people who commit these heinous acts are caught and prosecuted.

I refuse to merely do nothing about this most pressing issue for our city.

To me the first and most obvious step was to curtail access to illegal guns and offer severe penalties for those who choose to carry, possess and use them.

Though all battles are not yet won...we are advancing the front lines and making significant progress in our battle against crime in our community.

The officers of the APD are working diligently everyday to make our city safe....Making muscles that are strong.

Please help me acknowledge and thank all of our officers and members of the APD.

THE SOUL OF OUR CITY

Our outside treasures encapsulate the soul of our City – the intangible element that, despite our challenges, keeps us moving forward.

From the time of our first settlers more than 250 years ago, we have proven to be a strong, enterprising people.

Today that is as apparent as ever.

Allentown is reaping the rewards of a people that care, are ambitious and hardworking and look out for each other.

Our neighborhoods are rich with engaged residents and businesses.

I am so proud that in my many years as mayor I have seen this kind of selflessness demonstrated by our citizens many times.

Allentownians standing up and rising to the challenge.

I want to call out one today....Millie Canales

Millie and her family helped to start the city's Snow Angel initiative which works with the Lehigh County Senior Center to place volunteers with senior citizens who need assistance shoveling snow during the winter months.

She also diligently heads up a neighborhood group in her community.

Millie....It is folks like you that are the mortar which holds that foundation of this city together.

Then there are folks like Gary Millspaugh of Everlasting Life Ministries.

Gary picked up the thankless task of running our homeless warming station night after night.

Serving the poorest of the poor in our midst, he's doing a tremendous job...Let's show him our appreciation with a round of applause.

But we are stronger not just because of what we've done, but because of who we are.

If any of you have been following me on social media you have seen I have devoted a lot of time to talking about kindness.

It's something we seem to be losing quickly in our society.

How can we as a city regain the lost art of just being kind to one another?

Little things like:

- Pay it forward – When you are in a coffee shop or café, maybe you could buy a coffee for the next customer that comes in.
- Imagine what a surprise that person will get when they discover that a kind stranger has paid it forward for *them*.
- Hold doors open. Even for people who are a little further away from the door than usual.
- Pay compliments.
- Ask elderly neighbors if they need anything doing.

- When you are served in a shop, bar, restaurant etc, make eye contact and sincerely thank the employee for their help.
- Put coins in a meter, any meter, that's about to expire.
- Stand up for others.
- When a thought of generosity arises within you, act on it. Don't hold back.
- Stop complaining.

Think of how different this city would be if we all just practiced one act of kindness each day.

Isn't that a place you would want to live in?

I challenge you to join a movement for Allentown to be known as a City of Kindness.

Think of what that would do to attract people to live and invest in our city.

And the best thing about it ...it costs nothing.

In other words: let's become a city with its values written into its DNA; a city that lifts everyone as it rises; and a city with a future that's even greater than its past.

Folks....We live in a truly great city.

The challenges we face today are not insurmountable.

We must reach higher and dream bigger.

We must aspire to help everyone, to knock down barriers and create pathways where today there are only roadblocks.

That is the kind of city we must be.

It is the kind of city I know we can be.

Progress doesn't have to leave anyone behind, it should bring everyone along.

And this I commit to you, we will take action to make this vision a reality.

Your city will be with you every step of the way.

We will show up. We will lean in. We will never give up.

And we will succeed. All of us, together.

So.....We look to a bright future with a prognosis of good health.

We have much to accomplish, and we will do it together.

I look forward to working with you to help Allentown be the model of a healthy, vibrant, livable Great American City.

So....the state of our city — their city, your city — is not only strong, it's getting stronger every day.

Thank you and God bless.