



ESTABLISHED 1659

CITY OF NORWICH

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Mayor of Norwich

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State of the City Address January 2020

Good evening and welcome. Tonight, I would like to talk about the work that lies ahead of this new council. We're still fortunate that we can discuss the actions of the private sector that continues to invest in our community. As we sit here, we can travel throughout the city and observe development moving forward at Ponemah Mills and Taftville at the Hills, and on the West side where the Westledge Development Project continues to take shape. To the north, in Yantic, the Hale Mill Hotel Project is seeking state approvals in order to qualify for historic tax credits. Our boards and commissions granted approvals, conducted inspections, and provided top quality utilities to fuel these efforts. Norwich has had a role in all these projects.

Continued restoration can be seen along Main Street in downtown. A quick review shows that 34 small businesses have located in downtown

since 2015 while we await another half dozen or so openings that are under development. The Uncas Leap project continues to move forward with the help of our partners the Mohegan Nation.

Our planning department has updated our GIS capabilities-an important tool to enable investment. An interested developer can learn to the smallest detail the various programs we can offer and encourage their investment in our community. I worked with our city planner to see this through completion.

On another note I am pleased to let you know that our partner, The Chelsea Groton Savings Bank, has approved a third year of funding for the award-winning Global City Norwich Program. I am sure that all of us look forward to the chance to further celebrate our rich and diverse cultures while promoting additional small business development in our community.

I speak of these efforts in order to show how important it is that our city be a partner in encouraging success of these private investments and serve as a stimulus for additional private sector development.

SET THE RIGHT TONE - CONTROL SPENDING

But more work is needed. First we must continue to acknowledge that controlling the growth in government spending locally is important. Our

council will be voting on a new budget that will impact investors' decisions, including the decision to purchase a home in our community. Acknowledging that what we invest in and how it can stimulate or stop grand list growth is vitally important.

LEVERAGE PRIVATE INVESTMENT

A city such as ours needs tools to leverage private investment. The current downtown bond program approved by the voters in 2010 has had a positive outcome for our city: new businesses, reduced vacancy, and over \$12 million dollars of private investment.

I am recommending that we discuss the development of an additional economic development bond solely limited to code compliance grants. Should the city council decide to investigate this, I leave it to them to determine a dollar amount. However, I strongly recommend all areas of the city be eligible, namely our defined villages such as Thamesville, Westside, Greeneville, Norwichtown, Downtown, and Taftville. There are many details to be discussed and developed with council and voter approval, however, I feel that we need to help the private sector invest in these neighborhoods.

RETAIN ASSETS

My opening remarks focused on how private investment is reactivating our mills and our downtown. We must work to retain our assets when possible. Existing businesses, city facilities, and the like are important to a vibrant city.

Our efforts to retain minor league baseball continues. Our Detroit Tigers Single A affiliate, recently renamed the Norwich Sea Unicorns, is working strongly with us. This effort has garnered the support of over 110 Congressmen including our own Congressman Joe Courtney and we just gained the support of U.S. Senator Richard Blumenthal as well. This stadium has been a strong regional asset for our city, benefitting not only baseball enthusiasts but also many business and nonprofit organizations. Activities and events at the stadium have generated over \$1.6 million dollars for the needs of the community.

CELEBRATE OURSELVES

We need to take time to celebrate the good things happening in Norwich. There is a lot to be positive about. Eleven students from the Norwich School System received the Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents Award. They were recognized for their leadership service to the school, academic prowess relative to ability and service to others in the community. Electric Boat continues to grow and the orders for

submarine construction has more than stabilized, providing a growing employee base. This reinvestment in the U.S. Navy is good for Norwich and we are proud to host many sailors and their families. Three Rivers Community College has added a manufacturing apprentice center and the Eastern Workforce Investment Board has successfully helped place over 1,300 jobs over the last 3 years.

Voters in 2019 approved a road bond allowing us to address our infrastructure needs. The business park has Nalas Engineering expanding, Plaspak growth causes Concentra to relocate to West Main Street, and American System is moving from the former Lightolier building to the former Electric Boat building on Vergason Ave. NPU continues to contribute over \$8 million dollars to diversify the city's revenue.

Our marketing effort continues with the promotion of what Norwich has to offer as a place for investment. Our memberships with the CT Restaurant Association and CT Realtors Associations continue along with the broadcasting of developed commercials promoting restaurant, business, education and homeownership. We are worthy. This is a wonderful city!

BE CREATIVE

We need to embrace creative measures that may place our city in a unique position to deal with our challenges.

Our city continues to work with the state to identify and educate ourselves on the benefits of our success in having three Opportunity Zones. The federal regulations have only recently been adopted. We are placing Norwich development projects on the State of Connecticut website to promote investment here and will soon sponsor an additional workshop with them to assist investors looking for Capital Gain advantages. In addition, we want our city considered as a potential partner for future EB growth, as we possess over 70 acres of waterfront along both sides of the Thames River. Recently adopted State legislation now allows the establishment of Brownfield Land Banks. They can be established for the purpose of acquiring, retaining, remediating and selling brownfields to assist cities in advancing the redevelopment of strategic sites that otherwise remain idle and blighted. Norwich has over 100 such properties and returning these to the tax role and productive use is important.

Additionally, the General Assembly passed a new law this year. “An Act Concerning Abandoned and Blighted Property Receivership”, goes into effect on the 20th of this month. This is another tool that can help the

community address properties that show signs of distress such as structural conditions, unsecured or vacant lots, fire hazards, collapsing walls/roofs, and landscape issues, etc. leading to corrective improvements to eliminate blight and improve property values. I hope these two tools will spark an interest to reposition unproductive properties in our city while not exposing the city to future liabilities. I am asking our council and city departments to review these tools.

Another area for discussion is the Airbnb development for the downtown district to promote feet on the street and greater people density. This will require that we look to address the future parking needs of the city proper here in the Chelsea District. If Airbnb is to be regulated by the City, we should make it easier for it to exist in our downtown. One additional idea would be to ask adjoining property owners to discuss how we might combine development through the location of shared ADA investments, such as elevators, stairwells and even accessible structures like elevated walk halls connecting buildings over roads in downtown thus expanding upper floor access.

On the city's administrative side, the City Council approved a \$675,000 bond in July 2018 which enabled Norwich Public Schools to integrate human resources and accounting functions with the City. The majority of

the integration project has been completed. This project has reduced the schools' costs by one accounting position through attrition so far and will continue to improve the efficiency of human resources and accounting operations for both the general city and education departments.

The final topic that I would like to discuss this evening is the appointment of a school construction committee whose purpose is to help lead our city forward as we make difficult choices. It is my recommendation that we address this as soon as possible. State law requires they be given a two-year notice on any request for school construction grants. This is one of the most important activities that this council will do and it will be over several years, in phases.

ENDING

It is my hope that our new council will approach these suggestions with an open mind. I also look forward to hearing from each of you as we work together. I invite you to express yourselves fully. I welcome your suggestions and ideas. And I thank you for your willingness to serve our community. In closing I will leave you with a quote from a local columnist who pondered the following:

“Economic development, achieving and sustaining it, ... is how we attempt to return to a point in the past that can never come again, and we

make that idealized version of what once was into a definition of what we wish to be.” Bill Kenny