

2017 State of the City Address  
Mayor William J. Barlow Jr.  
Oswego, New York  
March 27, 2017

Each year, pursuant to the Oswego City Charter, the Mayor shall report to the Common Council a statement of the general affairs of the City, otherwise known as the State of the City Address. To fully understand the current state of the City and the progress we've made, it is necessary to recognize the context under which my administration began. Before we took office in 2016, the City of Oswego was plagued with years of indecision and inaction. Our taxpayers were burdened with a nearly 60% increase in property taxes over four years, which was in addition to significant increases in water and sewer fees. The City's code enforcement program and permitting system were ineffective and in a state of complete disarray. Our City's infrastructure and roads were deteriorating, our municipal buildings were neglected, and neighborhoods were losing value. The problems facing the City weren't intermittent; they persisted and compounded year after year, Mayor after Mayor, Council after Council, for two decades.

That changed in 2016. Guided by strong leadership and solution-oriented proposals, my administration and this Common Council got to work immediately upon taking office. Rather than focusing on any one exclusive group of people or specific issue, we worked together to make Oswego a better place for all residents. We demonstrated unprecedented levels of teamwork, support and cooperation, for which I am extremely grateful. Those high levels of support and cooperation led to an unprecedented amount of success in our first year together. Our collective leadership, hard work and dedication took our City from being a community that was continuously falling further and further behind, to a community that now leads the Central New York region in making positive changes, moving forward and changing its identity. I am proud to say that we are now a community that other communities point to and say, "Look at what Oswego is doing." In December of 2016, I delivered a "Year in Review" speech, summarizing our many significant successes. In an effort to add context to our City's state, I'll recap the larger success without the intention of slighting any other accomplishment or department.

During our first year, we secured nearly \$16 million in grant funding for several different areas within the community. The City of Oswego was 1 of 122 communities to compete for \$10 million in downtown revitalization funding, and we were 1 of 10 communities to win that funding. Funding from the Downtown Revitalization Initiative has re-energized downtown and will ignite economic development projects by leveraging potentially \$50 million in private investment, along with planning projects in the heart of our City. We were the recipient of over \$3.5 million in New York State water grants to assist with projects required under the \$85 million Consent Decree, helping to finance the projects with an alternate funding source, other than relying solely on our rate payers. We also took a bold, but creative step to implement a commercial water rate for our larger users, ensuring fairness to our single-family home owners. Being a waterfront community is our trademark, but past administrations have failed to capitalize on this significant and valuable resource. We set out to create a comprehensive plan to take advantage of and to better utilize our waterfront. A waterfront feasibility study has been conducted and we now have the ultimate vision for our waterfront that has been needed for decades; we can now begin work to fulfill that vision. In addition to the grant awards I've already mentioned, we competed for and won \$1 million in CFA funding for several different projects, most notably \$590,000 to begin our execution of the waterfront plan.

2016 was a transformative year for the City of Oswego. Although the accomplishments I've outlined are significant, I am confident the work that has been done with our Code Enforcement Office and Department of Public Works will make the most significant positive difference in our community over the long term. With the help of the Common Council, we established a powerful and adamant Code Enforcement Office, not beholden to landlords, but to the folks who live in our neighborhoods, maintain their property and care for our community. We've developed strategies to hold negligent landlords accountable, while empowering tenants and neighbors to band together to regulate landlords who have proven they can't regulate themselves. We've addressed some of the most notoriously blighted properties in the City and maintained the political willpower other administrations have lacked, to see our efforts through. We've tripled the amount of yearly reported complaints and more than doubled the number of documented violations, while shutting down properties that don't meet the basic and minimum housing standards. We've simplified and expedited the entire permitting and development process to support, accommodate and encourage investment by our small business owners and local contractors.

The Department of Public Works has undergone significant restructuring and changes to be more productive, effective and efficient. We've focused on the aesthetics of our City to improve curb appeal and pride, even during the winter months. We've invested in infrastructure, buildings and equipment, while deploying the DPW to address long lasting issues and to work to remedy decades of deferred maintenance. We paved approximately \$850,000 of roadway, including the "forks in the road" intersection of State Route 104 and Hillside Avenue, which was in dire need of attention. We've invested an immense amount of time and resources into our parks and public facilities, as well as making it a priority to help our downtown small business owners by promptly removing snow, increasing attention and awareness of our downtown. Most significantly, we've made a concerted effort to expedite work requests from our residents and work orders from our City Councilors. We've made great strides in our first year with our code enforcement efforts and DPW – and we're just getting started.

I have said before and I am as confident as ever, that 2016 will be remembered as the year the City of Oswego turned the corner, embarked on a new beginning, rebranded and reignited itself. We made difficult decisions but positive changes. 10, 20 and 30 years from now our residents will look back at 2016 as the year we began our resurgence and had the future of our community at the forefront of our decision making. The progress we've seen in such a short time is remarkable, and is the product of a hard-working, thoughtful and ambitious City administration comprised of dedicated and caring department heads. We should all appreciate the important work they do on a daily basis, and I sincerely appreciate the help they've provided me personally up to this point. While we enjoy the headlines of winning grant money, making significant positive changes and succeeding at overcoming larger challenges, it is the day-to-day operations carried out by our departments and employees that have made the last 15 months so successful.

We've had some tremendous success and a great deal of momentum up to this point – now we must follow through with what we started. We must continue to work together to successfully implement all we accomplished in our first year together. We will need the same level of dedication and hard work from our departments and employees, and I'll need the same

cooperation and support from the Common Council. I take great pride in believing that our citizens believe in us collectively as a government and support the decisions and progress we're making. But given all that we accomplished in 2016, expectations for 2017 will be set high, and I intend to exceed those expectations.

We will continue to build upon our code enforcement efforts by pushing the envelope and relentlessly patrolling consistently problematic landlords. We intend on maintaining our partnership with the County Land Bank, which has already proven to be productive and beneficial as we've submitted three more long-time, dilapidated homes to be demolished. Those easily observed victories will continue to stack up as our Code Enforcement Office gains experience and continues to grow. Earlier this year, I changed the City Section 8 HUD housing inspector to a full-time position. That move has already paid dividends. Since January, 279 HUD inspections have been completed. 73% of the inspected units fail their initial inspection, meaning they do not meet the bare minimum Housing Quality Standards set forth by the Federal Government. 81% of the units that failed their initial inspection were written up, re-inspected and brought into compliance. Furthermore, I have instructed the Section 8 Office to develop and provide me recommendations to stiffen the City HUD Administrative Plan. This is another tactic we will use to force landlords to provide tenants with the basic living standards, while continuing to improve conditions in our neighborhoods.

Earlier this year, we embarked on a re-write of our City Zoning Code. Another failure of previous administrations was allowing the Zoning Code to be undermined, resulting in neighborhood degradation and fundamental planning blunders in every corner of our City. The Zoning Code update will provide continuity and guidance in terms of City planning, and will reinforce and expedite the progress being made in restoring and revitalizing our neighborhoods by groups like the Oswego Renaissance Association.

The Oswego Fire Department will have a new Chief in 2017 with the appointment of Randy Griffin. Randy is a professional and a knowledgeable expert in fire service, emergency management and homeland security. His leadership will undoubtedly bring stability, creativity and diversity to the Oswego Fire Department. After a turbulent but necessary 2016, the department's best days are ahead of it. Under Chief Griffin's leadership, the Oswego Fire Department will become an even better department, enhancing operations and providing the best service to City residents.

Tonight, we intend to follow up on our recent successes with the Camden Group at our wastewater facilities by introducing the Camden Group to our City water plant. This initial proposal will enhance and improve operations at the water plant, while saving the City at least \$140,000 annually. Along the same lines, in 2016 we reduced the amount of money we spent on employee overtime by nearly 30%, roughly \$300,000, and in 2017 our top focus will continue to be finding new and creative ways to improve City services to taxpayers, while minimizing tax and fee increases.

We are also committed to address the issue of poverty in our community. Last year, I appointed the LIFT Oswego taskforce to participate in the Empire State Poverty Reduction Initiative. The LIFT Oswego task force will work to develop goals and innovative strategies for helping

individuals and families achieve their full potential. Similarly, we must acknowledge the presence of illegal drugs in our community and the resultant problems that are created. To assist in efforts to reduce illegal drug use, earlier this year the City of Oswego sent a police officer to a D.A.R.E. training course, so we could integrate the updated and improved D.A.R.E. program into Oswego City Schools. I will also work diligently to forge new partnerships to help the City of Oswego combat the presence of illegal drugs in our community. In the very near future, I'll be announcing an exciting new initiative that capitalizes on these partnerships by establishing a program that can get drugs off our streets, while helping folks in our community at a time when they need it most.

Finally, consolidation has been a topic of conversation at the State level of government. Consolidation of services that saves taxpayer money is basic common sense, and I believe opportunities for consolidation should be considered whenever possible. After discussions with government leaders of surrounding towns, I've made it clear that City government is a partner and the partnership should be mutually beneficial. In 2017, I intend to improve and expand upon those partnerships and continue to work together with other local governments to better serve our residents.

So, what is the state of the City? The City of Oswego is back, it's rejuvenated, and it's moving forward with a tremendous amount of momentum. We are stronger now than at any point in recent history and getting stronger – and we're just getting started.

I'd like to close my remarks by thanking the City of Oswego departments, employees and the Common Council. I'd also like to thank all the non-profit organizations, civic clubs, volunteers, community organizers, contributors, stakeholders, County, State and Federal officials and all other supporters of this City who make this community what it is. Most importantly, I must thank the public – the City of Oswego residents – our constituents, for affording me the opportunity to serve my neighbors and my hometown, as we all work together to make this community a better place to live and work each and every day.

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