



OFFICE OF THE MAYOR

BEN WALSH, MAYOR

Feb. 8, 2019

Hon. Liz Krueger, Chair
Senate Finance Committee

Hon. Helene E. Weinstein, Chair
Assembly Ways and Means Committee

Members of the Legislative Fiscal Committee

Good Afternoon,

Thank you Chair Krueger, Chair Weinstein, and members of the Legislative Fiscal Committees for inviting me to these joint hearings to discuss the 2019 New York State Budget.

My name is Ben Walsh, and I've just begun my second year as mayor of the city of Syracuse. When I met with your committees last February, I told you that the situation my city faced was "daunting." One year later, I'm proud to tell that you that the people of Syracuse are taking steps to put our city on a better track.

We committed to a shared vision that Syracuse will be a growing city that embraces diversity and creates opportunity for all. We put constraints on city spending and accessed help from the State Financial Restructuring Board. These actions will help us achieve fiscal sustainability. We committed to invest tens of millions of city dollars in infrastructure for our future.

And last month, we unveiled a bold new strategy called "The Syracuse Surge." It's a plan to accelerate economic growth and neighborhood revitalization in Syracuse and Central New York. With the Surge, which will benefit from assistance from the State, we intend to jumpstart hundreds of millions of dollars in public and private sector investment in technology, education, employment, and housing.

I begin my remarks with these updates, because I want you to know that Syracuse understands its duty to lift itself up – but we still need partners.

Make no mistake: Syracuse still faces serious challenges. In our first budget, we projected an \$11 million operating deficit. Like other Upstate cities, we suffer from entrenched poverty. According to 2017 Census Data, the year before I took office, Syracuse had the ninth highest poverty rate in the country. The situation has a cascading negative effect on virtually all aspects of our community...significant vacant and substandard housing...students struggling in schools...neighborhoods suffering from crime...and gun violence increasingly affecting teenagers and children.

As we work to transform Syracuse in the months and years ahead, we will need your continued help and partnership.

The first area in which we anticipate close collaboration with the State and assistance from the Legislature is regarding the Syracuse Surge. The strategy is important to Syracuse, but it is also meaningful to the entire state. The path Syracuse charts will help other communities prepare for and compete in the technology-driven world of tomorrow.

The Surge builds on the city's \$38 million dollar investment in our street light network executed with the assistance of NYPA and the Governor. We'll convert to LED lights saving \$3 million a year in energy costs and maintenance, making the deal a revenue generator to improve our fiscal stability. It will also make us New York's flagship "Smart City," demonstrating how technology can improve services to residents, create a competitive advantage for business, and attract investment to the state.

Our plan includes the creation of the New York Center for Smart Cities in Syracuse, a command center for data and information generated by our technology network. The Center will be a place that cities and towns from across New York – and even parts of the U.S. and world – will come to see how they can implement Smart City capabilities. It will also attract the world's leading technology companies to Syracuse and New York State. This isn't just a dream – since announcing our street light program, these global leaders have been calling on and visiting Syracuse.

Because technology is changing the jobs of today and tomorrow, we will also create a state-of-the-art workforce development and education campus in our urban core. With support from New York State, the campus will feature a regional STEAM school – a Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math focused high school. It will serve students from the city of Syracuse and from the surrounding town and village school districts, making it the first of its kind school in Onondaga County. The school will take social justice and inclusion to another level by bringing rural and suburban students together with city kids.

The STEAM school will leverage the Syracuse City School District's leadership in career and

technical education – programs not currently available to outlying school districts. The subjects will include: Remotely Piloted Aircraft Systems, Computer Technology, Electrical and Mechanical Technology, Business and Financial Services, as well as a diverse program in the Arts including dance, theatre, visual arts, music, media arts, and writing. This groundbreaking approach, which already has support from our local school districts and the State Education Department, will require some actions by the Legislature to make it a reality. Your support on the special legislation required to create and operate this transformative school is critical to the success of the Syracuse Surge.

The Syracuse Surge is the centerpiece of our strategy to achieve our vision of growth while embracing diversity and creating opportunity for all. We are determined to make it reality. As we do, it will not only lift up our city, but it will also help drive all of the state to a place of leadership in the New Economy.

As driven as we are, I am also aware we cannot do it alone, and, as I have already indicated, we will need the support and partnership of the State and the Legislature. On behalf of the city and our community-based team that is executing the Syracuse Surge plan, I pledge to work with you to advance both our city and regional objectives.

As you consider the 2019 budget, there are other priorities I wish to share with you.

Earlier I referenced the housing challenges facing people who live in Syracuse. Our city is home to one of the oldest housing stocks in the nation where more than 40 percent of Syracuse homes were built pre-1940. In these homes, lead is a dangerous threat to children and families. The major source of exposure among U.S. children is lead-based paint and lead-contaminated dust, found in deteriorating buildings built before the federal government banned consumer uses of lead-based paint in 1978. Children living at or below the poverty line, in older rental housing, are at greatest risk. Lead exposure is prolonging and worsening conditions of poverty in Syracuse.

I ask the Legislature to mandate a cut in the acceptable lead poisoning levels by half, thereby intervening earlier in the exposure process and mitigating the impact of lead in childhood development. This change should be accompanied with additional funding to support the increased caseload. This is a public health issue that we should address until lead levels in all children are reduced to zero.

Affordable housing development is extremely important to the recovery of the city of Syracuse. When families and children have stable, quality affordable housing, they can find and keep jobs, lead healthier lives, and perform better in school.

Currently, the city of Syracuse receives about \$3.4 million a year through programs like New York State Home, SRDI, and Affordable Housing Corporation/AHC Funds. That allows us to upgrade and improve about 130 units, which is a good start, but it is not enough. As a next step, I ask the State to double this funding this year and help us create cleaner, better homes for not only our residents but residents throughout New York.

Like cities across New York and the nation, Syracuse's infrastructure is ailing. The number one complaint I receive as mayor is the condition of our roads. We also know that what is under our roads – municipal water and sewer systems – is in even worse condition, most of it a century old. The best way to address these issues is at the same time, through Dig Once projects. I'm asking the State to make it easier for cities to invest in their own infrastructure, by providing a dollar for dollar match for local investments in Dig Once projects. We currently have, at least \$30 million in identified Dig Once projects. With matching support from the State, we could get more done faster.

Regarding our water infrastructure, the city of Syracuse receives its water from Skaneateles Lake, a pristine Finger Lake southwest of our city. New threats from harmful algae blooms and changes in the environment require immediate support. I'm asking the State of New York to authorize a \$12 million investment for an intake extension that would reach further and deeper into the lake to ensure additional reliable water. We need this extension because if we have a water quality violation, the city has the potential to lose its filtration waiver and could be required to build a \$100 million treatment plant.

As I have described today, the resurgence of the city of Syracuse is well underway. While we face significant challenges, including operating deficits, persistent poverty, difficulties with housing and infrastructure, and continuing operating deficits, I am certain we are taking decisive appropriate actions to improve our condition. And I am optimistic that our Syracuse Surge strategy will enable us to achieve our goal of being a growing city that embraces diversity and creates opportunity for all.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

Sincerely,



Ben Walsh
Mayor