

State of the City of Beacon

January 2023

Introduction: I am offering my first “State of the City,” akin to what the county, state and U.S. do each year, and what prior mayors have done. Given that it is my first report, it will be a little longer, and extend to include some items across my first three years as Mayor.

As we all experienced together, COVID hit less than three months into my tenure as Mayor – it changed everyone’s lives and focus, with losses for many in different ways. As Mayor, I had to shift from working on issues like weekend traffic on Main Street, to providing regular broadcasts on COVID counts and precautions, keeping City Hall and City services operating safely, avoiding a total Main Street shutdown, and urging everyone to do their part and stick together.

We also experienced a national desire to improve policing and civil rights – which challenged us all take a long, hard look at ensuring fairness and compassion in policing – while keeping all of us safe. During these difficult times, everyone did their part; we stuck together. As a community, we have largely come through these trials better – not without loss, sacrifice, and government help – but also with accomplishing long-term improvements in how we live and work, how we treat one another, and how we ensure that no one is left behind.

And on the State of the City: Beacon, I am proud to report that the state of the City is excellent. Here are the details.

- 1. Excellent City Financial Health & Stability:** Beacon’s financial position is the best in memory. Throughout my 20+ years of service to the City as councilmember and now as Mayor, I have always been the taxpayers’ fiscal watchdog, working to limit property tax increases, while expanding services and investing in the City’s infrastructure.
 - **New Sales Tax Revenue:** Last year, I personally negotiated a new 10-year Sales Tax sharing agreement with Dutchess County, which in 2023 alone is providing an additional \$1 million in revenue to the City, and which will add \$20 million to our budget over ten years. To put into context, \$1 million a year is almost 10% of our total property taxes. This new revenue increase lets us hold the line on property taxes, add community services, and continue critical capital investments for Beacon’s future.
 - **Lower Property Tax Rates:** The City’s property tax rates are at their lowest levels in at least a decade, and I am committed to reducing them further to ensure that increasing property values don’t increase our taxes.
 - **No/Low Property Tax Increases:** The Mayor’s Budget for the last three years has kept the percentage increase in the City total property taxes at or below the State tax cap of 2% (plus new construction, see below). The Mayor, City Administrator and Finance Director are committed to continuing that trend.

- **Increased Nonresident Septage Revenue:** The City Administrator secured an additional half million dollars in annual water/sewer fees from non-resident users, which allows us to keep Beacon’s water/sewer rates low, and to continue modernizing our facilities.
- **Strong Bond Rating:** Because of our prudent financial management, Beacon maintains its Aa2 Moody’s bond rating, one of the best in the region, which allows the City to borrow at lower interest rates. We use debt to invest in our community’s future and are far ahead of other communities.
- **Additions to Tax Rolls Increase Revenue:** The City and taxpayers benefited from the addition of more than \$115 million in new construction to our assessment rolls in the last three years. That new construction has added about 7% (2.0-2.5% per year) of new property tax revenue without increasing any existing property owner’s tax bill – which the City uses to increase services and investment.
- **Five-Year Capital Plan:** Last year, the City developed and passed a full five-year Capital Program (the first five-year look in several budgets), which is how the City plans for our major investments, such as roads, sidewalks, dams, and more.

2. Improved Public Safety:

- **Open & Helping During COVID:** In response to COVID, we worked closely with City employees to safely keep virtually all City services open, including all City Hall services as well as our parks and public spaces. The City funded essential community support services, e.g., food pantry refrigerators and Main Street restaurant seating.
- **Ambulance Services:** For the first time ever, the Mayor’s Budget added \$200,000 to address a local ambulance service crisis, both contracting for new advanced life support ambulance service and subsidizing BVAC (Beacon Volunteer Ambulance Corps).
- **Firefighter Staffing:** In my first months as Mayor, we added four full-time career firefighters, and last year we created four lieutenant positions – which together ensure we have round-the-clock coverage and command structure. We are in the process of hiring a new Fire Chief and building a new central fire station.
- **Policing Review & Improvement:** In response to the Governor’s Executive Order 203, the Mayor created a diverse and representative Police Advisory Committee, which produced a police reform plan and continues to review and recommend improvements to the City’s policing.
- **Mental Health, Domestic Abuse, Addiction Help:** The Mayor’s budget added funding for a full-time Mental Health Caseworker to our Police department (1 of only 2 in the County) and our program is now a model for other communities. Our Police department began a “Help Not Handcuffs” program for cases where addiction is involved, and continues to provide dedicated support for domestic abuse situations.
- **Civilian Dispatch:** The Mayor’s budget added another civilian police dispatcher, which frees up officers to be out in the community.

3. Record City Infrastructure Investments: Beacon’s infrastructure is in the best shape it has been in decades, and major projects are currently underway. The City of Beacon includes hundreds of millions of dollars in critical infrastructure – approximately 55 miles of roads and sidewalks, as well as underground water, stormwater and sewer pipes; four dams and three wells; drinking water and wastewater treatment plants; a highway garage and equipment; parks and recreation facilities; fire stations and trucks; police vehicles and equipment; and municipal buildings and facilities. The Mayor’s Budget consistently prioritizes long-term investment in these resources, and the City Administrator maximizes other funding sources to modernize City infrastructure without undue tax burden. Some \$40 million in infrastructure projects are underway or beginning in 2023.

- **Main Street:** For the first time in decades, we completed an end-to-end repaving of Main Street, with multiple new pedestrian crossing improvements. As intended, the corner “bump-outs” and new striping for parking and crosswalks have slowed vehicles and improved safety.
- **Repaving & Sidewalks:** More than two dozen streets were repaved last year alone as part of the City’s annual street repaving program, along with new sidewalks on South Avenue and more planned this year.
- **Fishkill-Teller Ave:** This spring we will begin a full rehabilitation of Fishkill/Teller Ave, from the Route 52 city limit to George Washington’s bust, including new sidewalks. It is a \$10 million investment 20 years in the making, at almost no cost to City.
- **New Central Fire Station:** After two decades of studies, we have begun renovation and expansion of the Tompkins Hose Fire Station on Route 9D into a state-of-the-art central fire station – while maintaining full firefighting coverage during construction.
- **Dams:** Historic upgrades of the City’s Pocket Dam and Mount Beacon Dam are almost complete; our other dams and wells are slated for improvement.
- **Water & Sewer:** The City continues to invest millions of dollars in the City’s drinking water, sewer, and stormwater systems.
- **Dummy Light:** And, last but not least, the City restored and reinstalled our much-loved dummy light at Main and East Main Streets.

4. Enhanced Quality of Life / Tightened Zoning: The City has made substantial advances in quality of life initiatives in our community, funded in part from new construction that adds to our property tax base. We continued to implement the City’s Comprehensive Plan, including ensuring Main Street’s recovery and long-term success, and increasing affordable units and live-work options.

- **Main Street Access:** In my first month as Mayor, I created an *ad hoc* committee to look at Main Street improvements, including access, parking, and walkability. Several “quick wins” – better parking signs, side street stop signs, pedestrian crossings and “bump-outs” that slow traffic – are already in place. More to come.

- **Parks & Recreation Investments:** We reopened public bathrooms in our parks for the first time in a generation. The Mayor’s Budgets continue to expand recreation and community programs and facilities faster than any other City department, and we recently completed a 1,000-resident survey that will guide future services.
- **Trees/Garden Habitat.** The Mayor’s budget included increased funding for tree planting and maintenance, and funded local groups like our Green Teens to install pollinator patches at City properties.
- **Rail Trail / Greenway:** Working with the County and other communities, we are about to begin planning for a new rail trail, which will run from the Beacon train station along Fishkill Creek to Hopewell Junction. We are making progress on the Mayor’s concept of creating a Greenway loop trail on the east side of Fishkill Creek.
- **Farmers Market:** We successfully relocated the Beacon Farmers’ Market to a larger location on Main Street, helping make it one of Hudson Valley’s best markets.
- **Community Grants:** We launched Community Investment grant programs to support local non-profit programs and initiatives, and provided funding and logistical support for food assistance programs during the height of COVID.
- **Tighter Zoning:** The Mayor has led a number of focused rezoning efforts to benefit the City. On Main Street, the City now requires developers to offer public benefits, such as affordable housing or public space, in return for a fourth floor. Along Fishkill Creek and the Hudson, we require 25% minimum commercial space for new construction.
- **Short-Term Rental Enforcement:** The Mayor also led the rezoning that limits short-term rentals (e.g., Airbnb) to owner-occupied only, which will keep apartments for long-term residents. The City has invested in identifying out-of-compliance rentals and launched increased monitoring and enforcement.
- **Tenant Support:** The Mayor’s Budget added funding for tenant advisory services in partnership with Legal Services of the Hudson Valley, to help address evictions upon expiration of state/federal programs.
- **Adding Affordable Housing:** Beacon is a leader in affordable housing and is looking for smart ways to do more. 30% of Beacon’s rental units are in affordable housing programs (only the City of Poughkeepsie is higher in the County). The City sold the lot next to City Hall, resulting in 73 new affordable units (significantly exceeding a County study that set Beacon’s annual goal at five), and we are exploring additional rezoning or other opportunities.
- **Historic & Viewshed Preservation:** The City added multiple Main Street properties to our historical property protection zone, and defined protected viewsheds to preserve critical viewpoints around the City.

5. Sustainability & Climate Change Leadership: The Mayor committed to Beacon becoming the “greenest” community in the Hudson Valley and a leader in sustainability. We are doing just that.

- **100% Renewable Electric:** We have transitioned the entire City government to 100% renewable electricity – generated largely from the City’s solar farm on our old landfill and augmented by purchase of Renewable Energy Credits. The City will also be installing a solar array atop the City’s Highway Garage later this year.
 - **All Electric Firehouse:** Our central fire station renovation at Tompkins Hose will be 100% all electric, with geothermal heat pumps from underground wells in the repaved parking lot. We will do the same for other City facilities on a cost-effective basis.
 - **Green Municipal Fleet:** The City enacted its first green fleet policy, and we have now added both all-electric and hybrid City vehicles, replacing the most heavily used vehicles first and looking at adding more over time.
 - **EV Charging Stations:** We installed electric vehicle charging stations at multiple City lots and will be adding more at City Hall and the new central fire station.
 - **Danskammer Power Plant Opposition:** The Mayor personally drafted the City’s resolution opposing a new gas-fired power plant at the Danskammer facility (which is visible from Seeger Riverfront Park), and repeatedly testified as Mayor at public hearings in opposition. The plant was denied permits to move forward.
 - **Accelerated Achievement of NYS Climate Goals:** With the City Council, we set a goal of achieving New York State’s aggressive climate goals sooner than the rest of the state, and are on track to do just that. More to come.
 - **Climate Smart Coordinator:** We were one of the first New York communities to add a paid Climate Smart Coordinator, who works with the Mayor, Administrator and our Conservation Advisory Committee (CAC) to achieve our climate and other goals.
 - **Silver Status as a Climate Smart Community:** In 2020, Beacon became one of only two cities to achieve Silver Status as a Climate Smart Community in New York, the highest designation across the State.
 - **Composting:** Last year, the City piloted a municipal composting program – with both central drop-off locations and backyard compost bins – which composted more than 42,000 pounds of waste and is expanding this year.
6. **Good Government:** Beacon’s City Charter created a part-time Mayor and a full-time, qualified City Administrator. I believe taxpayers and employees deserve a professionally run city – one that uses taxpayer funds effectively, that empowers department managers and develops our employees.
- **Fair, Longer-Term Union Agreements.** Our Administrator negotiated fair, multi-year agreements with all three City unions, providing predictability and lower legal costs. The Mayor’s proclamation recognized Juneteenth as an official City holiday.
 - **New Full-Time HR Director:** We hired the City’s first Human Resources (HR) Director, to effectively support our 130+ full-time, plus seasonal and part-time, workforce.

- **Professional Management:** As Mayor, I have focused on successfully attracting and hiring a core team of well-trained managers – including our City Administrator and HR Director – and with their help, many department heads, including a new Chief of Police, Wastewater Plant Operator, Building Inspector, and soon a new Fire Chief.
- **Representing Our Diversity:** Our new City employees, including in both police and fire departments, continue to become more diverse and representative of our community, while making us all safer and delivering outstanding service.
- **Online Payments and Updated City Website:** During COVID, the City began accepting online water and tax bill payments (while keeping our City Hall payment window open). We expect electronic billing and more over time. We also consolidated previous Department websites into a new central website at www.BeaconNY.gov.

In closing, as I said at the outset, the state of the City is excellent. I am proud of the work we have accomplished together as a community.

Of course, there is more to do, but let's take a moment to appreciate what has been done.

I want to thank our City Council, the employees of the City, including our department heads, and our City Administrator, who make it all happen, as well as all the residents who volunteer their time for the City and the community in a myriad of ways.

I love Beacon. It has been my deep commitment of community service across four decades. It is an honor to serve you as Mayor.