

# State of the City of Beacon

## April 2024

**Introduction.** Last year, I delivered my first State of the City, reviewing our progress during my first three years as Mayor. Tonight, I want to provide an update on some of the achievements of this past year and our goals for the coming one.

To place this in historical context, Beacon has made a spectacular transformation in the 30+ years since I first joined the City Council in 1993 – from a down-and-out factory town with a largely boarded-up Main Street, into a rejuvenated small city with a thriving Main Street, preserved history and natural beauty – the envy of the Hudson Valley. That transformation did not happen by miracle or accident, but rather through rethinking the city’s direction, thoughtful zoning and other changes documented in our Comprehensive Plan, and decades of gradual change led by those who love and serve this city.

Yet we face new challenges today: How do we complete updating our 100-year-old infrastructure? How do we thoughtfully manage growth and development? How do we continue to improve quality of life? How do we do our part to ease a national housing shortage and support everyone in our community? How do we finance all that while not overburdening taxpayers? So, how have we done?

**Beacon, I am proud to report to you that the State of Our City, continues to be excellent.**

In the past year, we maintained **financial discipline**, enjoying more than a million dollar increase in sales tax from our new agreement with the county, and keeping our tax increase below the State-mandated property tax cap. We did that, while breaking ground on a **new central fire station**, making record **infrastructure investments**, improving our **quality of life**, continuing our **climate leadership** and providing high quality, **professionally run government**. Here are the details.

**1. Financial Discipline.** Beacon’s financial position remains the best it has been in the decades. Throughout my 30+ years of service to the City as councilmember and 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:** 2023 was the first year of Beacon’s new 10-year sales tax sharing agreement that I negotiated with Dutchess County. The City gained more than \$1,000,000 in additional sales tax revenue last year, which will grow to more than \$2,000,000 a year. To put this into context, an extra million-plus in sales tax revenue is equal to 10% of our property tax base, which the City can put to use without raising your taxes.
- **Lower Property Tax Rates:** Our 2024 City operating budget of \$35 million continued to lower property tax rates, resulting in our lowest rate since 2010. I assure you that increasing property values will not increase the property taxes paid by our residents.
- **Low Property Tax Increase:** In addition to keeping tax rates low, we are committed to minimizing any tax increases. The Mayor’s 2024 Budget kept the overall increase in total property taxes to 2% – despite higher inflation, and well below the State’s allowable tax cap. The Mayor and administration are fully committed to continuing this policy/trend.

- **Revenue from New Construction:** The City and taxpayers continue to benefit from new construction, which added \$27 million in 2023 to Beacon’s tax base, and more than \$100 million over the past 3 years. New construction adds tax revenue for expanded City services without burdening current taxpayers.
  - **Disciplined Financial Management:** The Mayor, City Administrator and Finance Director are all committed to finding non-property tax revenue sources and staying under the State property tax cap, while gradually investing in infrastructure and expanded services.
  - **Strong Bond Rating:** Beacon maintained 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 low-cost municipal bonding to invest in our community’s future.
2. **Improved Public Safety.** The City is a safe community – with great police and fire teams. Our biggest ongoing challenge is a national one: dwindling volunteers for fire/EMS services, and a need to fund a shift to more career staffing – which we work on gradually in each City budget.
- **Fire Staffing:** In my first term, we fully funded going from three to four firefighters 24/7; we later promoted staff to have a lieutenant on every shift. In 2023, we said thank you to retiring Chief Gary Van Voorhis and welcomed new Fire Chief Tom Lucchesi.
  - **Ambulance Services:** 2023 marked the first year of major City budget funds for local EMS service, with both a new contract for advanced life support ambulance service from *Ambulnz*, as well as funding to improve the Beacon Volunteer Ambulance Corps (BVAC).
  - **Public Safety:** Our police services, supplemented with mental health, domestic abuse and addiction services added in my first term, serve us well. My 2024 budget added another cost-effective civilian police dispatcher, which frees up officers to be out in the community.
  - **Central Fire Station:** And the biggest and most obvious news – if you pass by Route 9D and Main Street – is that last June the City broke ground on our largest capital project ever: a \$14.6 million rehabilitation/expansion of the Beacon Fire Station. As Mayor, I insisted we reuse an existing firehouse (vs. prior proposals to build at a new site), which substantially reduced costs and enabled investment in state-of-the-art fire safety and building efficiency, and avoided large tax increases. It is currently on schedule and on budget, and truly a pleasure to watch as the all-brick façade is unveiled. Expect community tours in the Fall.
3. **Record Infrastructure Investment.** The City has hundreds of millions of dollars in critical infrastructure – 50+ miles of roads and sidewalks, separate underground systems for water, sewer and stormwater; four dams, three wells, water and wastewater treatment plants; a highway garage and equipment; and municipal buildings (plus parks, fire and police discussed elsewhere). Beacon’s infrastructure is in the best shape it has been in decades. The Mayor’s Budget consistently prioritizes long-term investment, and the City Administrator maximizes non-City funding sources to avoid undue tax burden. Some \$40 million in infrastructure projects are underway or beginning in 2024.
- **Rebuilding Route 52:** The City began redesign work on Teller and Fishkill Avenues – a key City artery – more than 20 years ago. This administration secured almost 100% Federal and State financing, finished right-of-way and other preparatory work, and is awaiting bids

on the projects. The \$8.8 million current phase will rebuild the road, sidewalks and curbs, plus underground utility upgrades on Teller from Wolcott to Main, and on Fishkill from Main to Memorial Park. We hope to begin construction in 2024, and continue to seek funding to extend further on Fishkill Avenue to the City border.

- **Water/Wastewater Infrastructure:** The City continues its long-term investment in our drinking water and wastewater systems, including settling tanks, dewatering system and pump station for wastewater treatment; and finishing updates on two dams and soon beginning rehabilitation of the Melzingah Dam.
  - **Paving/Sidewalks:** We repaved 14 more streets in 2023 – Wolcott/9D, Alice, Cross, Eliza, Green, Harbor Hill, Hillside, Maddox, Robin, South Davies, University, West Church and Willow, and added new sidewalks by South Avenue Park and new railings on the creekside boardwalk at Madame Brett Park.
  - **Dummy Light:** And again, we repaired Beacon’s beloved Dummy Light in 2023, and are trying out new striping and signage to steer vehicles clear of it (I’m not holding my breath).
- 4. Enhanced Quality of Life:** In 2023, the City continued to make substantial advances in quality-of-life initiatives – funded in large part from new construction that adds to our property tax base and leverages our modernized infrastructure. We continued to implement the City’s Comprehensive Plan, focusing on Main Street’s long-term success, along with environmentally sustainable density in a few areas, and even a rethink of Route 52.
- **Main Street:** The Mayor’s Main Street Access Committee wrapped up its meetings, and the City has been implementing “quick wins” – better signage, side street stop signs, pedestrian crossings and “bump-outs” that slow traffic. We created numerous parking spots via simple changes in 2023, and started spiffing up light poles.
  - **Walkability / Public Transit:** Beacon received a “Walkers Paradise” rating of 96 out of 100 from WalkScore, compared to an average score of 48 for NY State. We are working with the County’s Public Transit system on increased options on three bus routes in June 2024.
  - **Beacon Rail Trail:** We successfully encouraged the County to consider expanding their rail-trail system with Metro North’s former Beacon Line – running from our train station, along Fishkill Creek, Main and Route 52, north to Hopewell. Dutchess County Planning kicked off a feasibility study in late 2023, so this exciting decade-long project has begun.
  - **Fishkill Avenue Concepts Committee:** I’ve formed a new Mayor’s Committee to look at how the former car dealership section of Route 52 might evolve, and to suggest concepts such as improving the streetscape and walkability, connecting to future biking/hiking on an adjacent rail-trail, and building a connector road to the high school and Camp Beacon area.
  - **City Park Improvements:** Our City parks and trails – our most popular public resources – have seen increased use. My administration has continued to invest in enhancing and maintaining them. 2023 improvements focused on Memorial and Green Street parks, including reopening public restrooms, and we installed a new basketball nets and backboards at South Avenue Park. In 2024, we are rebuilding the Wee Play Tot Park in

Memorial Park (new play structure, surface, fencing and site amenities) and renovating South Avenue Park (resurfaced tennis/basketball courts, new restroom).

- **Recreation Programming:** Since I became Mayor, the Recreation Department budget has doubled to more than one million dollars. The 2024 budget included a record 17% increase for Recreation, enabling the City to add a new full-time staff member and expand after school, summer camp and other programs.
- **Fjord/Beacon Trails:** The City strongly supports the Hudson Highlands Fjord Trail to connect Beacon and Cold Spring. We are collaborating on a future trail maintenance facility on unused property at our Transfer Station. We are also making progress on the Mayor’s concept of creating a Greenway loop trail on the east side of Fishkill Creek.
- **Adding Affordable Housing** Beacon is a Hudson Valley leader in effective affordable housing, with roughly 30% of Beacon’s rental units in affordable programs (second only to Poughkeepsie City). We are working with the County to redevelop the Main Street parking lot of its Motor Vehicle building for affordable housing. We recently submitted a letter of intent to New York State to become a Pro-Housing Community.

5. **Climate Leadership.** As Mayor, I remain committed to making Beacon a model of sustainability for the Hudson Valley. Beacon is a Silver-Certified Climate Smart Community (one of ten in highest category). To truly be climate “smart” we must prioritize what matters most find ways to achieve our goals over time without overburdening taxpayers.

- **100% Renewable Electric:** The entire City government runs on 100% renewable electricity – the lion’s share from the City’s own solar farm on our old landfill, plus purchase of Renewable Energy Credits.
- **Green Municipal Fleet:** The City continues to implement its green fleet policy, adding both all-electric and hybrid City vehicles each year. We also continue to monitor emissions from City operations, and install additional EV charging stations in public parking lots.
- **Green Central Fire Station:** Our central fire station will be among the most environmentally sustainable in the Hudson Valley. The all-electric station will feature geothermal heating and cooling, high efficiency insulation, natural lighting, and Electric Vehicle charging stations in an improved public parking lot above geothermal wells.
- **Municipal and Community Solar:** In 2024, we look forward to installing a solar panel array on the Highway Garage, and launching a community solar program with Mid-Hudson Energy Transition.
- **Municipal Composting:** We expanded the City’s recently launched municipal composting program. In 2023, we composted upwards of 100,000 lbs. in this program, and are continuing to grow.
- **Green Youth Outreach & Pollinator Gardens:** Once again the City welcomed Green Teen Beacon (a program of the Cornell Cooperative Extension) and supported them in planting pollinator flower gardens on City properties.

- **Planting Trees:** We planted even more trees in 2023 – at Memorial and South Avenue Parks and Main Street. This year we initiated a new program, where Beacon property owners can purchase and plant trees at almost 50% off retail price and direct delivery.
6. **Good Government:** Beacon’s form of government has a part-time Mayor, who manages a full-time, professional City Administrator. I believe residents, taxpayers and employees deserve a professionally run city – one that uses taxpayer funds effectively, that empowers department managers, and develops our employees. We have an outstanding City Administrator, and use outside professional services for our City Attorney, City Planner and City Engineer. I believe in empowering managers, and encourage robust debates on priorities and how to get things done, and I believe we get much better results and more satisfied employees. A few more specifics:
- **Transparency and Accessibility:** We strive to make all City board and committee meetings open to the public, well publicized, viewable live online and by tape on local cable, with opportunity for public comment.
  - **Attracting Quality and Diverse Staff:** We continue to successfully attract professional, well-trained employees. That includes a new City Planner, Building Inspector, Fire Chief and City Clerk, and quality additions in multiple departments that broaden our diversity.
  - **Improving Human Resources:** Our full-time HR Director has helped leverage the City Administrator and Mayor, updating and standardizing employee policies to effectively support our 130+ full-time, plus seasonal and part-time, workforce.

**Final Words.** In closing, as I said at the start, the state of Beacon is excellent. I am truly proud of the work we have accomplished together in the past year and during my four plus years as Mayor. More remains to be done, but let’s take a moment to review our progress with some perspective, and to appreciate what has been done.

This past year, I helped organize a meeting and discussion among the four current and former Beacon mayors, whose tenures cover the last 35 years of Beacon history – Clara Lou Gould, Steve Gold, Randy Casale and myself. Now there’s a true long-view perspective. One of the things that rang out clearly was a simple formula for progress, regardless of politics, partisanship and short-term travails: Have a shared vision of where we want to go, provide city services well, keep tax increases modest, and keep heading patiently toward that vision.

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 so many ways.

I love Beacon. It has been my deep commitment of community service for more than three decades. It is an honor to serve you as Mayor.