

2014 State of the City Address
Mayor Erin E. Stewart

- To all those gathered here in our Council Chambers tonight: welcome to City Hall and thank you for being with us.
- Distinguished members of the Common Council, elected officials, department leaders, city employees and, most importantly, my fellow citizens, I come before you tonight to deliver the first State of the City address of my administration.
- To be sure, whether you are a mayor, a governor or a president, there is always the strong impulse to say that the state of the city, the state of the state, or the state of the union is strong – or offer some other positive adjective – either to give reassurance or to gloss over the difficult realities we face in order to obtain a favorable sound bite or news story.
- I have been in office for exactly four months today, and if you all have learned one thing about me, it's that I have no desire to sugarcoat the truth or turn a blind eye to the monumental challenges of the job I was elected to do.
- Ladies and gentlemen, the state of our city is that New Britain is at a crossroads...and when you find yourself at a crossroads you have to make a decision to go one way or the other.
- For too long, we have been traveling down the same road. During good economic times it was easy to stay on this road, as we were helped by increased funding from the state and federal governments, an expanding tax base, and residents with more disposable income.
- But over the past few years, as our nation's economy cratered, the economic development in our City slowed, and our residents began having to do more with much less.
- Yet the government of this City has continued down the same old road.
- Whether it has been efforts by previous administrations to avoid political hazard, or been the refusal of the unions to realize the truth that the old ways of doing business are over, or been the result of good people who don't want to have to say "no" to our friends when they want something that the City cannot afford...

- Regardless of the reason, we simply cannot continue down that same old road.
- So many people in this business dwell on assigning blame and pointing fingers – and, invariably, those fingers always point backwards to the past.
- Now I’m not advocating that we forget what was done that has put our City in the dire position we now find ourselves in – but as George Santayana famously said, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”
- But I am here tonight to deliver a message that is focused on the future of New Britain, and to give you all fair notice that we are beginning a new era of municipal government in the Hardware City.
- Typically, these speeches are an opportunity for the Mayor to stand up and recite a litany of accomplishments, some grand...some not so grand...and conclude with broad appeals for bipartisanship and civility in our government.
- Rather than waiting until the end, I would instead like to *begin* by saying how proud I am to share the responsibility of governing our City with this Council.
- I honestly didn’t know what the working relationship would be between a Republican mayor and a Council with a Democratic majority when I took office.
- But over these past four months, I have been so pleased with the quality of communication, dedication and general respect that has marked the relationship between our two branches of government thus far.
- As we come into an extraordinarily difficult budget season, I have no doubt that we will certainly have our differences.
- But as long as we all remember that the person we are disagreeing with is, in fact, a person – and not merely the partisan letter that follows their name – and we remember that all of us deserve respect, I believe we will navigate these rough waters very well indeed.
- Shortly after I took office, the one thing that became apparent almost immediately was that, despite all of the wonderful projects, developments, and resources that we have, and despite all of the marvelous and talented people we have working in city government, there has not been a clear vision laid out as to where New Britain is going and how we are going to get there.

- Of course, we have many master plans, including plans for downtown development, emergency management, traffic flow, parks and recreation, and the list goes on...and we should have plans for these types of things.
- But so much of what we do in New Britain is the product of ad hoc opportunity and not the result of a coordinated vision that informs and guides every aspect of city government.
- Tonight, I am putting forward my vision for our City.
- It tells a story of what we will become, and it requires that all of us share in not merely the hope, but the belief, that the sweeping changes I will describe actually *can – and will – be done*.
- We will not begin by asking tired questions like “what are we doing right and what are we doing wrong...”
- No, we will begin by leading from where we are, resetting where we want to go, building on our strengths and embracing a future that will be different in many ways from what we know and do today.
- The vision is guided by six key principles, and if you listened to me on the stump last year, they should come as no surprise:
 - 1) delivering the leadership needed to be most responsive to our residents,
 - 2) providing our children with the education they deserve,
 - 3) being fiscally responsible,
 - 4) being transparent in all of our dealings,
 - 5) enabling New Britain to be truly “open for business,” and, most importantly,
 - 6) restoring pride in our City.
- The first component of my vision, indeed its most critical component, should come as no surprise...and it is that we will overcome our present financial crisis and get this city back on firm financial ground.
- Leaders are products of their times, and they are defined *less* by those things they choose to promote, and *more* by how they surmount the challenges that arise during the course of their term.

- Ladies and gentlemen, the financial crisis that the City of New Britain is now facing IS the defining challenge of our time together.
- How we deal with this crisis...and mark my words, it is a crisis...will be the legacy we leave behind.
- As I said earlier, I'm not interested in playing the blame game and spinning our wheels in an attempt to travel the road of least political risk. You can all make those assumptions as you see fit, but I'm not interested in playing that game. We have 73,000 people counting on us and no one deserves to be caught in political banter.
- Doing what is necessary to pull ourselves back from the brink is not going to make us any more popular – in fact, we must be prepared to incur the anger of those we represent in order to provide the bitter medicine our City needs to get well.
- Tonight, we took a bold first step down that new road by reducing or rescinding our current debt load by nearly \$19 million dollars.
- We also passed three critical items that will give the City the short term tools we need to deal with the current crisis and afford us the opportunity to put in place long-term changes that will bring us back to a structurally balanced budget.
- Among the items passed tonight was an authorization to issue tax anticipation notes (or TANs) to give us financial assurance as we move to close this gaping deficit.
- They reassure the capital markets and the rating agencies that, regardless of what happens, the City will have the necessary cash-on-hand to operate through the end of this fiscal year.
- But I want to be crystal clear here: issuing TANs will only come as a last resort. Even now, the City is pursuing more favorable options that include:
 - the leasing of certain city assets;
 - getting the City out of businesses we shouldn't be in and working with companies who can do the jobs far better, and far cheaper;
 - working with our union brothers and sisters to involve them in the solution;
 - eliminating certain city services;
 - increasing fees for services and licenses; and

- working with our department heads on major immediate spending reductions.
- Friends, we are well beyond mere belt-tightening here.
- We are all going to feel the pinch—and this is just to get us through the current fiscal year.
- In April, I will be back here to unveil my 2015 budget proposal in detail and, believe me, it is going to look a lot different than previous city budgets have looked.
- City government must be fundamentally changed in order to bring us to balance, and that is going to mean deep cuts across all departments.
- Everything is on the table...including the unfortunate reality that some jobs are going to have to be cut.
- There is nothing more difficult than having to let someone go, but the fact is that we have more government than we can afford in New Britain.
- And I promise the taxpayers of this City that before I come back to them and ask for a nickel more in taxes, I will have cut our budget to the bare bone.
- Getting to a structurally balanced budget is the primary goal of this administration. Structurally balanced means that what we spend is EQUAL to what we take in.
- I will work with any alderperson or department head who shares my commitment to right-size City Hall.
- This is the defining challenge of our time and it stands between us and the City we want to become.
- When I said that we were at a crossroads...this is it. This is where we choose to take a different path...and it's my sincere hope that we can take that path together.
- Now, while restoring our fiscal health is paramount and is the key to our City's rebirth, my vision goes well beyond dollars and cents.
- We are going to fundamentally change the culture in City Hall.

- Every organization has its own beliefs, attitudes and behaviors that shape how we think and act.
- City Hall culture seems to emphasize bureaucratic regularity, strictly separated functions, narrow job descriptions, correction rather than prevention, and exalts procedures over results.
- This culture tends to exist even in the face of facts that prove just how inefficient and error-prone it can be.
- Changing the culture of our government will take time, but the journey begins here.
- First, we will adopt an “outside-in” perspective to guide everything that we do.
- It demands that we look first at how our policies and procedures will be understood by, and impact, the community that we serve. We will no longer live in the “bureaucratic bubble” that often blinds us to reality.
- We will routinely seek outside viewpoints, both before we act and after, to help evaluate how we are doing.
- Second, there will be no “gotcha” attitude in City Hall.
- Yes, we are serious about our mission and committed to our oath to uphold and enforce the law, but we are equally interested in delivering quality services and helping our constituents stay ahead of problems, avoid mistakes and access the services they have paid for.
- Third, we will focus on cost reduction and efficiency without jeopardizing other needs.
- We will continually look for ways to reduce the costs of running government.
- Every expense must be justified as an investment that creates real value, which is why all purchase orders will continue to run through my office.
- But at the same time we are also committed to balancing this with the need to continuously improve core services to achieve the most effective and efficient delivery to the community.

- For example, we are currently auditing the way City Hall uses copiers and paper so that we can best reduce waste, cut costs, and streamline our everyday processes.
- Along those lines, I am aggressively pursuing options that will greatly expand the City's use of renewable energy – particularly solar energy – which will make us far less reliant on the grid and will include guaranteed reductions in our energy costs.
- Our vision also addresses our technological capacity in order to improve customer service to our residents.
- The single most important step toward doing this and bringing City government into the 21st century is creating a 21st century web portal.
- We must be able to provide a wide range of automated, real-time and customer-friendly services to our community.
- There is no excuse why a resident cannot pay their water, sewer and tax bills all online and all in the same place.
- Our Tax Collector, Cheryl Blogoslawski, has already taken steps to allow for online tax payments, and now we have to take it further.
- New Britain needs a robust website to provide for “whole citizen” account management.
- An open and user-friendly, but secure and accurate, system for online interaction and information-sharing is not about keeping us one-step ahead of our fellow towns...it is something we need just to keep up with them.
- Our neighboring municipalities have online capabilities that make interactions with their local governments seem easy compared to what we do here in New Britain.
- And we're not just focused on revenue collection, rather it's about sharing information and being able to communicate with, and better serve, a constituency that is continuously expanding their reliance upon, and expectation of, online customer service.
- I applaud our new City Clerk, Mark Bernacki, for the steps he is taking to put marriage licenses, land records and other essential documents online.

- It is our vision that if you need a license, permit or other certificate, you will be able to either complete the transaction online or, at the very least, be able to secure all of the paperwork so that your experience at City Hall is a brief one with no headaches.
- This is not about taking work away from current employees...this is about allowing those employees more time for substantive projects, while making City Hall accessible 24 hours a day.
- My vision also includes New Britain's schools.
- I don't know about you, but I am sick and tired of people using the New Britain school system as a punchline.
- Do we have our fair share of problems? Of course we do. It comes with the territory when you have a city our size with our socio-economic diversity.
- But what has become plain to me is that we, the leaders of this City, are in many ways responsible for the myth that our schools either aren't making the grade or are somehow failing our students.
- But that isn't the case and that type of attitude just serves to validate this myth in the minds of people both in and out of New Britain.
- When you take a look at the volume and quality of resources that we provide our students, from elementary through high school, and compare it with those provided by our neighboring communities with supposedly "better schools," the results will astound you.
- When you hear the stories of student achievement and their subsequent successes, and there are many, I am confident that you too will come to realize that New Britain schools are doing something right.
- Our educational facilities are outstanding and continually improving – including the multi-million dollar rebuild of Gaffney School that is ready to begin.
- As a relatively recent product of that school system, and a former member of the Board of Education, I can tell you firsthand that New Britain schools ARE something to be proud of.

- Yes, it costs a lot of money to provide that education and, yes, those costs continue to rise.
- Every year we hear the calls to increase funding for the schools and that's the only way we will show that we really care about the kids.
- Alternatively, if we don't increase the funding, we are told that we are somehow against our students or that we're balancing the budget on their backs.
- Well, I challenge anyone to say that I don't care about our kids.
- Whatever problems we may face in our schools, the cause of those problems is not a lack of funding.
- We need to change the way we think about, and talk about, our school system before we talk about putting more money into it.
- Rebranding New Britain as a place where our children get a first-rate education begins with us and it is where restoring the pride begins.
- At the same time, we must continue to refine our educational processes so that we are preparing our students for the jobs of this century...not the last.
- We must continue placing an emphasis on science, technology, engineering and math.
- The Health Sciences Academy at New Britain High School has been a tremendous success and I have been told by several of our local business owners that they are very interested in seeing us get the Manufacturing Academy off the ground quickly.
- There are good, skilled jobs to be had right here in New Britain, but we need to match our curricular options to their needs.
- Finally, our vision includes a command focus on economic development that makes sense.
- We have a wonderful core of small manufacturers and other businesses already in town.

- Companies like Polamer Precision, Rich Foods, Stag Arms, Admill Machine, and many others, are proud to call New Britain home and they are great ambassadors in helping us attract new interest.
- I am meeting with developers on a near-daily basis. We are working nonstop to maximize the influx of commercial interest and transit-oriented development dollars that are coming our way thanks to CTFastrak, which is scheduled to be finished in February next year.
- Whether it's economic development or innovative transportation solutions, we will continue to expand our grand list and make certain that everyone knows that New Britain is open for business.
- These are the broad strokes that define my vision for our City. Here is the goal:
 - If you live in New Britain, the achievement of our vision will improve your life. Your city's government will be about delivering high-quality services and offering better information and assistance in the form and fashion that you prefer.
 - If you're a business or property owner, it means you have a partner in making New Britain a better place to work and conduct commerce.
 - If you're a visitor, it means your experience will be safe and enjoyable.
 - If you work in New Britain city government, it means getting ahead of our challenges, working as a team across departments, having the chance to learn and grow on the job, while gaining a better understanding of how each of us contributes to, and shapes, our City.
- Whatever your perspective, New Britain will be a "city of the future" – one that inspires the best in its citizens, businesses and employees.
- We will overcome our great challenges and we will restore pride to The Hardware City.
- My friends, New Britain is at a crossroads....
- May each of us have the courage to stride boldly down this new path together.
- God bless you and God bless the City of New Britain.