

2015 State of the City Address  
Mayor Erin E. Stewart  
FINAL – 3/11/15

- To all those gathered here this evening in our Council Chambers, and to all of you watching at home: 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 provide you with the annual State of the City address.
- One year ago, I stood here and declared that New Britain was at a crossroads.
- We were staring down a current year deficit of \$19 million and a projected deficit for the next year in excess of \$30 million.
- At that time I said we had to make a choice: whether we would continue down the same old path that had led us to the brink of financial collapse; staring right in the face of a state takeover; or whether we would chart a new course and begin making the difficult decisions that would return this City to solid financial footing.
- Today, I can stand before you and confidently say that, because of the actions we have taken together, the state of our City is strong...and getting stronger.
- Last year, I wasn't able to deliver this speech until almost midnight...wearing my slippers...
- Although the hour was late, It didn't seem to matter because during the first four hours of that meeting, the government of this City took its first bold steps toward recovery, first by admitting we had a problem and then by doing something about it.
- That night, we rescinded over \$19 million in authorized-but-unissued debt.
- The Council also approved several transactions that would help us stabilize our finances for the remainder of the year and show the outside world that New Britain was serious about turning things around.
- Due in large part to the courage shown that night, the City of New Britain closed those gaping deficits and was able to finish the year in the black – and the recently issued 2014 audit confirms just that.

- What we did one year ago was just the first of many tough, but prudent decisions that had to be made...and we did so with the type of bipartisan support that has marked many of the City's achievement's over the last year.
- Last March, I laid out my vision for how I would govern and outlined the direction New Britain would take under my administration.
- That vision consisted of five key principles:
  - Being fiscally responsible;
  - Being transparent in all of our dealings;
  - Providing our children with the education they deserve;
  - Enabling New Britain to truly be "open for business"; and
  - Delivering the leadership needed to be most responsive to our residents.
- Being fiscally responsible meant addressing the City's financial crisis head on, not kicking the can to future Mayors and future Councils.
- I mentioned earlier that, as we began the budget process last year, our financial experts were already projecting a deficit of over \$30 million for FY 2015.
- We definitely had our work cut out for us.
- The 2014 budget had been shown to be woefully out of balance, so I made a promise to the citizens of New Britain that I would give them a budget that brought us back to structural balance.
- Simply put, structural balance means that our expenditures match our revenues.
- Unfortunately, it's simple concepts like this that government at all levels has a hard time grasping.
- We started from zero, analyzed everything, and spent days & nights in my conference room, but when we emerged we had a budget that was structurally balanced. We re-built every department budget from the bottom up.
- The budget I placed before this Council almost a year ago was truly honest.
- There were no phony numbers. We didn't spend all that time analyzing data and spending trends only to warp them into numbers that suited us.
- It contained over \$16 million in cuts from the prior year.

- I might remind you that \$120 million of our \$216 million total budget goes directly to the Board of Education, so \$16 million in cuts - to funds over which we do have discretion - represents a reduction of nearly 17% of the city's overall budget.
- They key was to achieve those cuts and still provide an extraordinarily high level of public services to our residents.
- One of the biggest cuts was a reduction of \$1.2 million to the Fire Department.
- Many people scoffed and said that there was no way we would ever achieve those savings.
- But, to their credit, the Fire Union worked with the City in long negotiations over the past five months and, tonight, the Common Council will be asked to approve a new contract that will actually net us \$1.3 million in savings in this fiscal year...and an additional \$3 million in savings over the remainder of the contract term.
- I actually think Lieutenant Sanzaro summed it up best in The Herald on Saturday when he described the contract as "Not the best deal for firefighters, but certainly a fair deal."
- And I thank the Fire Union for ratifying that contract, even though it was by the slimmest of margins.
- While we are on the subject, I would like to take this opportunity to thank all our union brothers and sisters for their willingness to be part of solutions that will make New Britain stronger.
- We could not make many of these critical, structural changes without them and their cooperation at the negotiation table.
- Unfortunately, after several years of poor budgeting, mismanagement, and overspending, \$16 million in cuts just wasn't enough to restore balance.
- So we were forced to raise revenues.
- Did we want to? Of course not. We pay taxes here too.
- But I firmly believe that the people of New Britain sent me here to fix a problem, not to sugarcoat or downplay it.

- At the time I called it the bitter medicine the City needed to get us on a course to recovery and that is exactly how I view it today.
- To my fellow residents, thank you for the sacrifice you have made to restore stability and responsibility in city government.
- Nothing worth doing is ever easy, but when you can begin to see the results it all seems worth it.
- And in January, when Standard & Poor's gave us an unprecedented three-notch upgrade in our bond rating from "BBB with a negative outlook" to "A with a stable outlook", I think we all had reason to feel a degree of validation about the tough decisions we have made together.
- When you see, as we did last week, major cities like Chicago receiving three-notch downgrades, the courage that this City has shown to end "business as usual" becomes that much more apparent.
- And on that note, I'd like to say a few words about our employees.
- In November, I sent a memo to all department heads advising them that the financial picture for the next two fiscal years looked bleak and asked that their 2016 budget requests reflect that reality.
- They are in a far better position than any of us to know where to find savings and cost reductions within their own departments.
- So I was quite pleased to see that most of them heeded my message and have submitted requests that either hold the line or reduce it.
- We have a remarkable group of men and women who keep this City running and I thank our department heads, most of whom are here tonight, for their leadership and for keeping up with me.
- Thanks in large part to the job you have done implementing our budget and adhering to stricter cost-controls and oversight, our finance team now believes that we are poised to finish this fiscal year in the black.
- We are making distinct progress, but we are far from being out of the woods. There is no question that we are moving in the right direction and I look forward to continuing that direction when I come before this body to present my 2016 budget in April.

- Last year I also pledged a command focus on economic development that fits into our overall vision for the City.
- Today, the phones in Bill Carroll and Ken Malinowski's offices are ringing constantly with people who are interested in checking out New Britain.
- On Farmington Avenue, we have a major development already underway that will bring a new gas station, a new convenience store, a new Dunkin Donuts, a new high-quality restaurant, a new ice cream parlor and a new senior living facility.
- That facility will have 90 beds, 30 of which will be dedicated specifically to Alzheimer's and dementia patients. The footprint will be 125,000 square feet, it is projected to create 212 new full-time jobs and scheduled to break ground in June.
- At Pinnacle Business Park, Polamer will soon be opening their new 150,000 square foot state-of-the-art manufacturing facility.
- On John Downey Drive, Admill Machine is set to double the size of their existing footprint.
- On Newington Avenue, in the old McChristy Building, Marsam Manufacturing is proceeding with a full-scale rehabilitation of their facility, including a new roof, new windows, and new offices.
- On Columbus Boulevard, the City has secured \$2.7 million in grants to demolish the old police station and get that piece of prime real estate back on the tax rolls.
- New restaurants like Riley's Gourmet Hot Dogs, Willy Pep's Corner Café, and Dulces Cupcakes are turning out delicious products.
- I am particularly proud that later tonight the Council will hopefully vote to approve the sale for the complete restoration of the Berkowitz Building on Main Street, rehabilitating one of the City's most notorious eyesores and creating a beautiful new gateway to our thriving Broad Street community that will consist of mixed-use retail and residential components.
- And it really wouldn't be a State of the City address if we didn't mention Costco.
- I am so pleased that after four years, we were finally able to come together and get this project off the ground so that, by the fall, our residents won't have to drive to Waterbury to shop there anymore.

- These projects represent only a fraction of the entire economic development picture, but the bottom line is that we'll be spending a fair amount of time together this year cutting ribbons.
- Much of this newfound interest in development is being spurred by the upcoming opening of CTfastrak on March 28<sup>th</sup>.
- It is no secret that New Britain has benefited from significant investment from the state and federal governments to assist transit-oriented development around the stations, and to make our downtown area more pedestrian-friendly.
- We have done our fair share of investing as well - People want to invest in cities that are investing in themselves
- Later this summer, Phase III of our streetscape program will commence.
- It will fundamentally transform downtown to have more of a "town square" feel. Central Park will be expanded and will soon become a place where people can congregate comfortably, while frequenting food trucks and street vendors & hopefully a farmers market.
- In addition, we are moving forward with plans to renovate the Main Street overpass into something that truly connects downtown with Broad Street and gives us a new signature piece of architecture.
- No more will we have the 'tale of two cities' that were split by a highway.
- It will be known as "The Beehive Bridge" and will celebrate New Britain's motto that "Industry fills the hive and enjoys the honey" by incorporating a beehive sculpture as the focal point, as well as a honeycomb effect along the bridge façade itself, and honeybee's at either end.
- Whether folks are driving in on Route 72, or arriving via CTfastrak, this project will let them know that they have arrived in the center of our City.
- This spring will also see the start of Phase II of the Broad Street reconstruction project and will include new pavement, curbing, lighting, as well as a completely redesigned Pulaski Park.
- Over at our sports complex, we have made key investments in our three stadiums.
- Last summer, field turf was installed at Veterans' Memorial Stadium along with a state-of-the-art running track.

- A few weeks ago, contractors began a full-scale facelift on Beehive Stadium that will completely rejuvenate the facility while making it accessible and safe for all.
- And next month we will be installing a new gutter system at New Britain Stadium that will finally address some of the water runoff issues that have occurred over the past few years.
- I suppose I can't mention New Britain Stadium without making a comment or two about the Rock Cats.
- Surely the news that the Rock Cats would be departing for greener pastures in Hartford was a tough pill to swallow – especially the shady manner in which it was brokered and announced.
- But I reaffirm my pledge that, regardless of what the Rock Cats do, professional baseball will continue, in some form, in the Hardware City.
- Obviously, I cannot go into any level of detail, but suffice to say that conversations are ongoing with multiple leagues and there is no shortage of interest.
- In the meantime, New Britain will continue to be the proactive and dutiful hosts we have always been as the Rock Cats play their final season at Willow Brook.
- The upgrades at Beehive, New Britain & Veterans Memorial Stadiums are all critical projects to maintaining and enhancing key assets, but we have other equally important parks across the City that need some love too.
- At Stanley Quarter Park, we will be constructing a paved multi-purpose loop around the pond.
- At A.W. Stanley Park, we are preparing for the opening of New England's first Go APE! high ropes adventure course in the spring.
- And over at Chesley Park...I think it's time to put field turf there too.
- Chesley is home to the Junior Canes Football program – one of the finest youth programs in the nation – yet the field they play on is in such poor condition that it borders being unsafe.
- Both the Junior Canes and the children of our East Side neighborhoods deserve a quality playing surface, and – with the Council's help – I am prepared to push this project forward this year.

- Another project that will be accomplished in 2015 is the development and implementation of a new City website.
- Bringing City Hall into the 21<sup>st</sup> century is not something that can be done overnight – believe me, I’ve been trying.
- But working with our Director of Information Technology, Adam Pokorski, and the members of the IT Commission, we will be moving more of our key services online and substantially enhancing the number of transactions that can be executed on the internet.
- Along those lines, our Town Clerk, Mark Bernacki, has already begun the herculean task of digitizing the records in his office to make it easier for people to access critical documents without having to leave their home.
- We are also moving ahead with the implementation of the RASTRAC system for monitoring our Public Works vehicles, which will increase the efficiency and accountability of our employees...especially during snow operations.
- Speaking of new technology, we are in the final phases of the largest solarization project ever to occur in New Britain.
- Solar arrays have already been installed on the roofs of Smith, Smalley and DiLoreto schools, and the array at Shuttle Meadow Reservoir is currently under construction.
- These systems will be energized this spring, saving the City money and reducing our carbon footprint.
- Continuing with that effort to achieve city savings, many of you participated on the Blue Ribbon Committee – which was a joint effort with the Board of Education & City Council to discuss ways we can better collaborate in order to use best practices and begin to break down the wall that exists between our two buildings.
- It certainly wasn’t easy, but it was a great first step in building relationships, and I am proud to say we have begun acting on the Committee’s final recommendations - one of which is on the council agenda for later tonight, to increase our city bid threshold to match the board of education’s, making it easier for us to purchase items in bulk and realize savings.
- I am particularly pleased of the work we have done in the last year to address the issue of homelessness in our City.



- We brought community providers, city leaders, members of the clergy, and other key people around the table and collectively developed a new plan that is action-oriented and reflects today's realities.
- The 10 year plan to end homelessness is now known as "Building Hope Together: New Britain's Permanent Workplan to End Homelessness."
- I am very proud of the work this City continues to do to help those less fortunate than ourselves and I have been quite pleased by the commitment of the members of our Building Hope Together task force to find housing, treatment, and love for anyone who needs it.
- This past year, we received some devastating news that, due to a change in the federal formula, New Britain would no longer receive any Emergency Solutions Grant funding. We use that funding every year for our cold weather overflow shelter which on any given night has over 30 occupied beds from December to March.
- Once we realized this was happening, the Building Hope Together committee had to find a solution.
- Our friends at CMHA came to the table with the location, the Friendship Center pledged staff support, and a few of us were then able to successfully secure the \$90,000 in grants to operate it from the CT Coalition to End Homelessness, the Connecticut Department of Housing & TD Bank's Charitable Fund.
- It was a great example of how the City can work collaboratively with our community providers to get rapid, and successful, results.
- I am also proud of this administration's work in support of our friends at VA, Inc. to help homeless veterans and their families.
- With our help, VA Inc. was able to secure final funds that were needed to finish their rehabilitation of their building on Arch Street, which will bring 18 new units of permanent supportive housing to homeless veterans.
- We have also gained an additional 25 units from other sources, for a total of 43 new permanent supportive housing units in New Britain in the last year alone.
- And beyond helping the homeless, the City's revitalized Homeownership Program successfully provided down-payment assistance to seven of New Britain's newest and proudest homeowners!

- I know that the members of this Council share my commitment to ending homelessness and encouraging homeownership in New Britain, and I thank you for that.
- Restoring the pride in New Britain is another key to my vision, and as you can see, we have a lot to be proud of.
- But in addition to what we have done financially, economically and socially, we have also had some wonderful opportunities to come together to celebrate that pride.
- Events like the Little Poland Festival, the Rose Garden Festival, the Great American Boom were resounding successes – most made possible by the generosity of our local businesses & foundations.
- Oktoberfest was even bigger and better than the previous year.
- Even though Nick is taking a year off due to the streetscape construction, plans are in the works for another signature New Britain event and I look forward to sharing those details once they are confirmed.
- The New Britain Museum of American Art is in the process of completing their latest expansion, which will further augment their reputation as one of the country's most prestigious art institutions.
- CCSU is completing work on their brand new 8-story dormitory, and they continue to expand their course offerings, as well as their standing, within the region's academic community.
- We are also blessed to have some of the finest emergency responders keeping us and our families safe.
- Whether it is fighting crime, fighting fires, or saving lives, the men and women of the Police, Fire and Public Safety Telecommunications Departments do us proud each and every day. There is never a dull moment in our 13.2 square miles and I speak on behalf of all our residents when I say thank you for keeping us safe.
- To be sure, there are a lot of reasons we can be proud to say that New Britain is our home, and I will continue working tirelessly to grow that list.
- Finally, I would like to thank my partners in government, the men and women of this Common Council.

- With a Republican mayor and a Democratic council majority, I think most people would assume that the result would be gridlock, but that couldn't be further from the truth.
- In fact, nearly every major accomplishment of the past year has been done on a bipartisan basis, and for that I thank you.
- I've been told much of that is due to the fact that my administration provides the Council with as much information as we can in advance of a vote or meeting.
- I believe strongly in transparency, and providing this Council with the ability to make as informed a decision as possible on any issue, to me, is a matter of simple respect.
- That's not to say we haven't had our "interesting moments" this year, but I believe that our relationship as coequal branches of government has been marked with civility, respect, and a desire to make our hometown better.
- As long as that remains, we will continue to do great things together.
- Thank you for your time and attention this evening, may God bless you and may God bless the great City of New Britain.