

Mayor Byron W. Brown
State of the City Address
February 21, 2008

Thank you. I'm pleased to see so many of you here today. Thank you for attending and demonstrating your interest in the future of our great city.

I'm honored to come before you today to deliver the 2008 State of the City Address.

I want to acknowledge our new County Executive Chris Collins, my former colleague in the New York State Senate Vincent Gentile, now a New York City Councilmember and all of the elected officials who are with us today.

Thank you to E.C. Stansbury and Adam Walton for singing our National Anthem. Also thanks to Father Albert Smith for today's Invocation and Pastor Alberto Lanzot for the Blessing of the Meal.

I look forward to Pastor Michael Chapman's Benediction at the conclusion of today's gathering.

During last year's address, I said that the future of Buffalo rests with our ability to grow our economy, improve our quality of life and ensure government accountability.

Those are the core principles that have continued to guide my Administration since coming into office in January 2006.

And so – today – I say with confidence: the City of Buffalo is well on its way back. The State of our City is strong, growing and our renaissance is in full swing.

Crime is down, investment is up and the promise of a strong, vibrant future is brighter now than what we've experienced in decades.

Yet, we must do more.

While there may be different opinions on exactly what led to Buffalo's past economic downturn, everyone knows that in 2003 the State of New York imposed a financial control board on the City of Buffalo, that one year later, imposed a sweeping wage freeze on all city employees.

When I took office, I said that among my goals for the City of Buffalo was the fiscal recovery of the city, including lifting of the wage freeze and transitioning from a control period to an advisory period.

Fully achieving this outcome will be a strong symbol of the City of Buffalo's economic resurgence.

Well, I'm proud to remind you that on June 5, 2007, at my request, the Buffalo Fiscal Stability Authority voted unanimously to lift the wage freeze.

My Administration is working tirelessly to restore the fiscal health of our great city, provide an attractive environment for investment and to help achieve something that we all long for – more job opportunities for our children.

And, our hard work is paying off.

Earlier this year, the accounting firm of Deloitte & Touche issued a favorable 2006-07 audit for the City, which reported a \$21.6 million surplus, the largest in the history of the City of Buffalo and the fifth consecutive surplus the City has reported since the fiscal crisis began in 2001-02.

The announcement of the surplus follows two successive Wall Street credit upgrades and my Administration's implementation of best practice policies, including: establishing CitiStat Buffalo, a nationally recognized accountability and management tool; ensuring long-term fiscal stability through the creation of a \$40 million rainy day fund; conservative budgeting; and last, but certainly not least,

lowering property tax rates by a total of 10% over the first two years of my Administration.

It is now time to acknowledge that the fiscal crisis in Buffalo is over.

We must also recognize the sacrifices our city workers have made to help us get to this point.

With the Wage Freeze lifted, I recently informed the Control Board that I was paying our city workers the Living Wage and I recently negotiated a new contract with our Crossing Guards' union, which is the first union contract ratified since the wage freeze was lifted.

I believe in treating city workers fairly. But city contracts must also be fair to city taxpayers by being affordable now and into the future.

As hard as we have worked to improve Buffalo's fiscal condition, it is the investment and commitment of businesses locally and from outside Buffalo that highlight the positive change that is taking place here. There is over \$4.5 billion in new economic development projects throughout the city, as well as the healthy growth of real estate in our residential neighborhoods and business districts.

I was pleased this past year to welcome the opening of Labatt USA's new national headquarters, which, now listen very carefully, moved its national headquarters from Connecticut to Buffalo – not North Carolina, not Florida, not Pennsylvania, but here in the heart of downtown Buffalo.

The arrival of Labatt USA's national headquarters, along with New Era Cap Company and BlueCross BlueShield of Western New York, sends a clear signal that Buffalo is a headquarters city.

And already, within a year of being in Buffalo, Labatt USA is demonstrating that the company is an excellent corporate citizen. Two weeks ago they hosted over 500 of their business partners and wholesalers from across the United States for their annual winter meeting in Buffalo. That was a strong indicator of their belief in our city and community.

Labatt USA's President Glen Walter is here today and I want to recognize him for making such a strong commitment to Buffalo.

Glen, of course, our region is happy to reciprocate by accounting for 28% of Labatt USA's annual beer sales in the United States! And from now on every bottle of Labatt Blue or Blue Light sold in the United States it will say – Distributed by Labatt USA, Buffalo, New York.

And, then there's the pond hockey tournament.

I had the opportunity this past Saturday to witness the latest great outdoor winter event in Buffalo.

Dozens of hockey players and hundreds of spectators came to the Erie Basin Marina to participate in the first ever Labatt USA Pond Hockey Tournament in Buffalo.

It was such an extraordinary event and everyone was so enthusiastic about being outside in February! It was clear the event touched a nerve and so this past Monday I joined Congressman Brian Higgins to announce our plan to open and promote the marina and the waterfront as an all-season destination.

I want to personally thank Congressman Higgins for his leadership, dedication and commitment to Buffalo's waterfront.

With the City now transferring the Aud to the Erie Canal Harbor Development Corporation, we are that much closer to demolishing a symbol of our city's past and reaching our goal of a new, vibrant Buffalo waterfront.

And down the street, work is already underway for the single largest private investment in the history of the City of Buffalo, the \$335 million Buffalo Creek Casino, which will employ 1,000 people and provide an annual revenue stream to the City.

But progress isn't just taking place along the waterfront. This year, cars will return to main Street in downtown; Kohl's Department Store will be open in North Buffalo – the first national department store to locate in the City of Buffalo in at least a decade; the rebirth of the former Dulski federal building is underway, as is the new federal courthouse project; we are transforming the former East Utica Library into a state of the art business incubator, which I will name in honor of the late former City Councilmember Beverly A. Gray, and establishing the East Side location for this Resource Center; and our success in preparing shovel-ready development sites continues in the Buffalo Lakeside Commerce Park and the adjacent former Republic Steel brownfield, which brings over 400 acres of prime land for investment into the City's inventory.

To build on these successes, I am today announcing the creation of the new position of Chief Economic Development Officer in my Administration. By creating this new position, the City is adding more fire power to secure more private sector investment in Buffalo.

The primary goal of this new position will be to focus all City resources toward creating economic growth in the private sector.

What we need for a stronger Buffalo – job creation, expanded tax base, population growth and neighborhood retail and residential development – will all benefit from this effort.

With the City's Chief Economic Development Officer, we will provide a roadmap to grow the City economy, boost job creation and enhance workforce development.

While we recognize the record investment businesses are making in Buffalo, we must be certain that we have a well-trained workforce.

Through our public education system we must raise the academic achievement of our youth, but that effort doesn't just rest in the schools.

I am proud that in 2007 I awarded nearly 900 certificates to students who successfully completed my 6th Annual "Reading Rules!" Kids Summer Reading Challenge. Since its establishment in 2001, over 2,500 students have completed the program and over 22,000 books have been read.

I want to thank Dr. James Williams, Superintendent of the Buffalo Public Schools for being supportive of this program, along with many organizations and businesses in Buffalo that are dedicated to learning and literacy.

In addition to reading skills, we know our youth must enter the workforce with basic work skills.

That is why I am pleased my Administration placed 2,536 city youth between the ages of 14-24 into employment this past summer with local businesses, as well as not-for-profit and faith-based organizations.

Through the 2007 Summer Youth Employment Program, I urged local businesses to participate in an effort I knew would benefit both the student and the employer. In my first two years as Mayor and with the community's help, we have put over 4,300 city youth to work, including hiring the most Hispanic youth in the city's history in 2007!

Today, I again urge all businesses, CBO's and faith-based organizations to consider participating in these programs this summer.

It is imperative that the investments made in Buffalo – in our youth, our neighborhoods and our businesses – are matched by our commitment to ensure that Buffalo is a safe city.

My Administration has implemented specialized police activities and added state-of-the-art technology to strengthen crime-fighting efforts and fulfilled our promise to grow the Buffalo Police Department.

Included in these activities is the Mobile Response Unit. Launched on January 14, 2007, this highly mobile and flexible police unit has targeted high crime areas and illegal guns, gangs and drugs throughout Buffalo.

And last night, working with other police agencies, we arrested 65 drug dealers in South Buffalo, making this neighborhood and other neighborhoods in Western New York safer.

I'm pleased to report that the dedicated police officers of the Mobile Response Unit had a record-setting month of crime-fighting in January when they made 354 arrests. The MRU also posted monthly highs for guns seized and cash seized.

Since 2006, through the effort of our police officers, the Mobile Response Unit and this past summer's one-day Gun Buyback, a total of over 2,800 illegal guns have been removed from our city streets.

Violent crime continues to decrease in the City of Buffalo, with a 12% reduction in 2007.

And, overall, crime in the city has dropped 7% over the past two years.

To further enhance our crime-fighting efforts, it is expected that our new 60 high-tech surveillance cameras will be fully functional in a matter of weeks and I have already called for an additional 40 cameras to be added to this citywide system.

But our greatest success in fighting crime and maintaining our residents' quality of life comes from the presence of the well-trained and dedicated men and women of the Buffalo Police Department.

Upon taking office as Mayor, it was apparent that the number of police officers in Buffalo had become too small. I responded immediately by launching an effort to change that.

As a result, by July 2008, we will have approximately 100 new police officers on our city streets.

We are also strengthening the Buffalo Fire Department's overall capabilities, both through added manpower and technology, to assist in their critically important fire investigation efforts.

In fact, earlier this week I made the first high-ranking promotions in the Department since 2005. I am proud to say included in these promotions is the first woman in the city's history to hold the position of Battalion Chief.

We are also acquiring new equipment and technology to further increase safety and allow our fire personnel to perform their critical work better and smarter.

One of the new pieces of equipment we purchased is a Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear, and Explosives (CBRNE) Vehicle, purchased with federal funds. Working closely with local, state and federal agencies, the new specialized vehicle will be used by the Fire Investigation Unit in the investigation of fire and explosion scenes.

We've also added something that goes beyond additional manpower and technology.

In January of last year we welcomed the newest member of the Fire Investigation Unit who's 60 pounds, approximately three feet high and enjoys Alpo more than chicken wings.

"Brad" is an ATF-trained dog who is helping the unit detect arson-related fires.

All of these efforts are paying off for the 9-member Fire Investigation Unit – well, 10 if you include Brad. They are expert in analyzing and investigating suspicious fires, weapons of mass destruction, and other critical cases occurring in and around the City of Buffalo.

Based on their expertise and dedication, I'm very happy to report that since 2005, arson arrests have increased by 92% and they increased 68% alone in the last year. What's more, arson fires continue to fall in the city.

This shows that our investments are paying off.

Just last week two arrests were made in the June 10, 2007 arson fire that critically injured Buffalo firefighter Mark Reed. It was a devastating injury that nearly killed Mark, but his toughness and courage helped bring him through an extremely difficult recovery.

It was out of this tragedy that Barbara Reed, Mark's mother, publicly called for a citizen-supported effort to help rid the city of vacant, dilapidated structures that often are involved in the kinds of arson fires that nearly killed her son.

In a letter to the Buffalo News, Barbara Reed said, "I challenge anyone with the money to Take Down A House. Don't just think about it, show some moxie, find out how to go about it and do it!"

I heard Barbara Reed's message; in fact, she and I talked about this issue on several occasions and last August, I launched the city's "5 in 5" Demolition Plan. The plan targets demolishing over 5,000 vacant, dilapidated structures in 5 years at an estimated cost of \$100 million.

To date, 836 vacant, dilapidated structures have been demolished and there are an additional 273 are scheduled for demolition.

I want to thank the members of the Western New York State legislative delegation who have supported my Administration's efforts to secure the state resources to make this and other important city initiatives successful.

I want to particularly thank Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver for recognizing the unique challenges faced by upstate cities and express my appreciation for his strong support in working with my Administration to create the Restore New York program.

Two years after its creation, this program will help provide the financial resources to make the 5 in 5 Demolition Plan a success.

And Governor Eliot Spitzer should be commended for recommending an allocation of \$13.2 million over the past two years to Buffalo that will help my Administration remove vacant structures and rehabilitate the old Trico Building, paving the way to create new jobs.

Continuing my determination to support our neighborhoods, I have directed the Mayor's Anti Flipping Task Force to address the role of sub-prime lending and mortgage foreclosures in the cycle of abandonment and property flipping in Buffalo.

In addition, my Administration today is filing a lawsuit against banks that have foreclosed on properties and improperly left behind vacant structures in our neighborhoods.

Since taking office I have more than doubled the number of Clean Sweeps conducted by the Save Our Streets Task Force, going into each City Council district to address blight, crime and other quality of life issues.

I'm extremely proud to tell you that this successful pro-neighborhood program was named to *American City & County*[®] magazine's list of the 2007 "America's Crown Communities."

And since this national recognition, I have added a new anti-graffiti unit that will work with the Save Our Streets Task Force to help rid our city of this unsightly form of vandalism.

I have been very proud of the Mayor's Call and Resolution Center, but I want to provide even better service to our residents.

Therefore, this year, I will launch a new citywide 311 system that will provide a "one-stop" center for access to city services, information and non-emergency police assistance.

It was during my State of the City address last year that I made a commitment to resolve the Hickory Woods neighborhood controversy.

On October 17th this was accomplished. My Administration's \$7.2 million Hickory Woods Settlement Agreement ended four lawsuits against the City. This was an historic resolution to an issue of environmental justice that loomed over the residents of this section of Buffalo for almost two decades.

This settlement concludes a chapter in the City's history that began during the Griffin Administration, came to light during the Masiello Administration and is now resolved in my Administration.

But situations such as this will not stop me from continuing to pursue home ownership and neighborhood development opportunities that will strengthen our tax base, support our residential communities and provide greater overall stability to the city.

The new Sycamore Village neighborhood is under construction – a pedestrian friendly, park-like community of 24 new homes that embrace the concept of 'new urbanism,' which promotes compact, walkable communities.

The new homes will be completed by fall 2008 and will sell for an average of \$200,000.

Sycamore Village will help fulfill the continuing demand for new, market-rate housing in Buffalo by adding single family homes to the lofts and condominium projects that are continuing to expand nearby in Downtown. This new development provides a good mix of housing options, while integrating them into a setting that promotes the benefits residents derive from city living.

A bit further north from Sycamore Village, another exciting neighborhood-based initiative is about to get underway.

This effort, known as Four Neighborhoods, One Community, is a joint effort by the City of Buffalo and the Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus.

This is a comprehensive and coordinated development effort treating four distinct neighborhoods as one community, including the Medical Campus, the Fruit Belt, Allentown and Downtown.

This effort, which will be a national model for redeveloping our urban core, will ensure that the surrounding neighborhoods benefit from the investment being made in the Medical Campus.

I am pleased that the University at Buffalo is deepening its commitment to the City of Buffalo and the Medical Campus. And I also thank all of our other institutions of higher learning for their continued commitment to our city.

In addition to these neighborhood-based housing efforts, our City's Churches have been leaders by investing in our older neighborhoods and commercial districts. They have built housing in communities and invested in commercial areas of the city when others ignored the opportunities. These investments have now attracted the attention of private sector developers. Because of the success of these efforts, I will launch this year the Faith-based Community Initiative. This initiative will partner with faith-based community development corporations in the City to develop key projects in targeted neighborhoods. I am committing \$1 million dollars from the Grow Buffalo (Economic Development) Fund for this Initiative. I expect this investment to leverage millions in private sector investment.

Another important factor to our economic renaissance is Buffalo's great arts and culture. And for that reason, I am today declaring 2008 as the Year of the Arts in Buffalo and I will commit \$1 million to build a new Urban Arts Center in the Michigan Avenue Cultural Corridor, further diversifying and strengthening the great arts assets of Buffalo.

Further deepening my commitment to the arts in the city, I am also pleased to announce the appointment of Barbra Kavanaugh as Chair of the once dormant Buffalo Arts Commission.

Barbra brings a unique background as an attorney, and a former Buffalo City Councilmember. Barbra is with us today and I want to thank her for accepting this important challenge.

Also this year, in the fall, the new Burchfield-Penney Art Center at Buffalo State College will celebrate the opening of the first major museum to be built in Buffalo in 100 years.

I want to thank Buffalo State College President Dr. Muriel Howard and Barbra Kavanaugh for supporting these arts-related initiatives that will benefit the entire City of Buffalo.

Over the past year, I have had the opportunity to speak about urban policy issues before national audiences at Harvard University, the Chautauqua Institution and many other prestigious organizations.

I was proud to have been asked to represent the City of Buffalo in these forums and I used the opportunity to highlight the progress we are making in Buffalo, while acknowledging that we still have much work ahead of us.

As I participated in these events, I kept returning to a central truth that affects urban America – the current administration in Washington has failed the cities of our country. For example, annual appropriations through HUD's Community Development Block Grant have fallen every year since 2001, including a 3 percent reduction in Buffalo's current allocation.

Our newly appointed Deputy Mayor, Donna Brown, will oversee this and other areas that play an important part in ensuring adequate services for our city's neediest residents. She is now preparing a comprehensive anti-poverty plan working with me, other senior staff and members of the community.

Among my initial steps to address the critical issue of poverty will be the allocation of nearly \$200,000 to the Father Belle Center, which will leverage a \$1.2 million AmeriCorps grant award. This will bring new vitality to this community and ensure a brighter future for many by supporting youth in college along with others pursuing a GED, while they serve the community. Buffalo's AmeriCorps force will engage in a variety of urban revitalization efforts, including neighborhood clean-ups and beautification, assisting the elderly and disabled among other community building activities.

We will work to keep our community centers open and operational, we will continue to revitalize our older neighborhoods and commercial districts, and we will strengthen our commitment to helping the youth of our city. We must also continue to utilize critical federal resources to address and reduce the high concentration of poverty in some of our residential neighborhoods

We are providing additional funding for agencies that commit to consolidation with other entities. These consolidations will save precious resources by eliminating duplication of services and allow us to better serve low-income youth and seniors.

I want to thank the Buffalo Common Council for working with my Administration and supporting this plan.

Our cities are the engines of national prosperity and they form the core of our national economy.

Going forward, I will continue to speak out on the vitally important role cities play in our nation and highlight the progress we continue to make in Buffalo.

As we leave here today, let us embrace optimism and leave behind the negativity that has at times divided our community. Let us join together with one common mission: Restore Buffalo to its rightful place as "the Queen City."

For my part, I will continue to pursue the policies and initiatives I put in place when I first took office – strengthening our economy, improving our quality of life and ensuring accountability of government services – which are now yielding results, many of which I have outlined in this address.

With your help, enthusiasm and optimism, we can again make Buffalo one of the nation's most important and successful cities. Thank you again for joining me here today. Let us all leave secure in the knowledge that the City of Buffalo's best days are still ahead of us.