



## Mayor Leighton presents the 2006 City Budget

Thursday, October 13, 2005



Good afternoon and thank you for attending the City's 2006 budget presentation. My Administration, through the cooperation of City Council, has reached several of its main goals in the past year. We will continue to succeed by making difficult decisions in order to ensure a bright future for the City of Wilkes-Barre.

Last year, I identified the priorities of my Administration, which included improving the quality of life of our residents, delivering economic development initiatives, increasing the police presence throughout the City, cleaning the neighborhoods, lighting the downtown and increasing residential housing.

I believe that we had major successes in each of these areas in 2005. Several important economic development goals were reached. The much-anticipated Northampton and Main Street Project is near completion, with the last beam of steel in place. This project alone will bring a minimum of 600,000 visitors to our business district each year, which will restore Wilkes-Barre to an 18 hour downtown. Further along South Main Street, the former call center building is now occupied by Wilkes University's Center on Main, eliminating the City's taxpayers of \$14 million in debt obligations.

The State Office building on South Washington Street is also near completion and will bring up to 300 additional employees downtown everyday. Perhaps the most obvious improvement to the downtown is the removal of the canopy system which will make way for a \$7 million streetlight and streetscape enhancement project.

At the start of 2005, we continued our emphasis on fighting crime by hiring ten new police officers. As a result of this effort and our partnerships with other law enforcement agencies, including the Attorney General's office, the F.B.I., the D.E.A., the State Police and the District Attorney's office, the number of arrests, especially drug related, have increased. This proactive approach to the war on drugs resulted in a substantial increase in arrests

since 2003. These law enforcement officers are to be commended for the outstanding job they've accomplished.

By making the City of Wilkes-Barre an attractive place to live and work, we will retain the area's young adults. This higher quality of life will attract new residents and businesses to our city. We instituted a program that will fulfill these goals by reinvesting in the infrastructure of our neighborhoods, such as installing more than 325 new catch basins, reconstructing 33 streets, replacing two bridges and cleaning storm and sanitary sewer lines.

Over the past year, we have improved the quality of the City's neighborhoods by performing 1,100 rental inspections and demolishing numerous dilapidated homes. More than \$500,000 has been invested in the Elm Street Project and an additional rehabilitation program that will provide \$140,000 in grant funding for homeowners.

Almost \$226,000 has been spent on the revitalization of Kirby Park and other neighborhood parks. We purchased and installed \$27,000 in new playground equipment this year alone, providing quality recreational areas for our residents and their children. My Administration spent \$138,000 rehabilitating the historic North Main Street Wall, repairing it for the present time and preserving it for the future.

We have been committed to working with residents to keep our City's streets and neighborhoods clean. I would like to thank all of our residents who worked in partnership with our DPW employees to clean our neighborhoods. My successful "I believe... in Beautifying my Neighborhood" initiative has publicly commended twelve residents for taking pride in both their properties and the City.

My Administration is also very pleased to welcome the first family to Pine Ridge Estates. I look forward to the completion of the development's 150 properties, eleven of which are currently under construction.

In addition to creating and improving housing options for residents, the City has been cleaning its own house. We have restructured the City's pension debt, reducing the annual debt service payment by approximately \$1.9 million. By also restructuring and reducing the City's workforce, we have improved the productivity and efficiency of our employees.

Much-needed improvements have been made to City-owned properties, including Police Headquarters, Fire Headquarters, the South Fire House and City Hall, totaling almost \$1 million. Technology in City Hall has been advanced through the implementation of a City website and email capabilities throughout the offices. By investing in new equipment and vehicles, we have ensured that City employees can do their jobs. Over the past year we have added seven new police vehicles, two new garbage packers and other equipment and improvements to our fleet, in excess of \$700,000.

Great strides have been made fiscally to eliminate deficit spending, to fund previously unfunded debt and to pay our bills in a timely manner. When I took office in January of 2004, the financial picture was bleak. The City owed 250 vendors payment on delinquent invoices, totaling approximately \$10.8 million in financial obligations. Today, I am proud to say that we continue to remain current on all our bills.

In conjunction with PFM, we are nearing completion on a five year fiscal plan which charts the City's progress from near financial ruin to financial success. Providing for police, fire, DPW and other services are daily challenges that cities across the country are facing. Revenues are not keeping pace with increased costs for public safety, the growing costs of employee health benefits and wages and the need to maintain an ever deteriorating infrastructure. The City is mandated to balance its budget and this is a responsibility that my Administration has taken very seriously. There are very few choices in balancing stagnating revenues with increasing costs.

Despite these struggles, approximately \$30 million in grants have been authorized to fund the development of the Northampton and Main Street Project, the initial funding for rehabilitation of the Sterling Hotel, construction of additional parking, the installation of new street lighting in the downtown and facility improvements to Police Headquarters.

These projects would not have been possible without the continued support of our Governor Edward Rendell, his staff and numerous State and federal officials, including Congressman Paul Kanjorski, State Senator Rick Santorum, State Senator Arlen Specter, State Senator Raphael Musto, State Representative Kevin Blaum and Luzerne County Commissioners Greg Skrepenak and Todd Vonderheid. My Administration will continue to seek

sources of alternative funding to ease the tax burden for our residents. At times the challenges seem insurmountable, but my staff and I are up to the task and will continue to work diligently to improve the City's financial condition.

As a result of this hard work and the cooperation of all City employees, the City's residents and numerous volunteers, I am pleased to announce that I am proposing no new tax increases in 2006. It is an on-going process to balance the budget. Efforts will continue into 2006 to cut costs and to increase revenue to provide efficient, effective municipal services to our residents.

Currently, we are working on projects that will become next year's success stories. We will spend \$1.7 million enhancing the fire protection for our City, including a new firehouse at Hollenback Park and new fire fighting equipment. We will bring wireless capabilities to the City of Wilkes-Barre and revitalize Coal Street Park. We anticipate the completion of the initial phases of the street light and streetscape project, the state-of-the-art Intermodal Transportation Facility and the relocation of new restaurants and businesses to the City.

People are beginning to once again believe in the revitalization of the City of Wilkes-Barre. Private development is occurring throughout the City, including the new Schiel's Market on George Avenue, the Motorworld Expansion Project and the continued investment of King's College, Wilkes University and Wyoming Valley Health Care System.

If we continue to believe in the vitality of Wilkes-Barre and its future, so will others and, as a City, we will succeed.