



2008 City of Wilkes-Barre Budget Address



Thomas M. Leighton, Mayor

Today, I am pleased to present the budget for the City of Wilkes-Barre's 2008 fiscal year, my fifth as mayor. Since taking office in 2004, my administration, along with Wilkes-Barre City Council, has overcome great obstacles to rebuild the City of Wilkes-Barre. Before plans for Wilkes-Barre's future could be made, my administration had to recover from actions of the past. On my first day in office, \$10.8 million in unpaid bills from over 250 vendors awaited my administration. We restructured the city's workforce, funded previously unfunded debt and eliminated deficit spending. We did more with less, laying the foundation for a revitalized, *financially stable*, City of Wilkes-Barre.

Since then, our accomplishments have been significant, including increasing public safety, participating in over \$100 million in economic development programs, restoring our neighborhoods and improving our infrastructure. Despite difficult financial conditions, our commitment to fiscal responsibility will not waiver in 2008, as reflected in this \$38,312,320 budget. There is still more work to be done in the City of Wilkes-Barre and my administration is committed to continuing our city's renaissance throughout the coming year.

Investing in Public Safety

In order for Wilkes-Barre to flourish, residents and visitors must feel safe. For this reason, increasing public safety has always been the cornerstone of this administration. The Wilkes-Barre Police Department fights crime and violence with every available resource and with as many law enforcement officers as possible.

To aid them in this battle, my administration sought alternate funding sources to add officers to the force. One year into office, the city instituted a \$52.00 emergency municipal services tax, allowing the city to hire ten new police officers in early 2005. Just one year later, the city was awarded the competitive *Police on Patrol* grant by Governor Rendell's Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency. The grant's additional \$250,000, combined with \$500,000 in appropriations from the 2007 budget, resulted in an additional 11 officers for the Wilkes-Barre Police Department in 2007. Less than six months later, the Police Department reestablished a three member K9 Unit and 11 member Emergency Service Unit.

This substantial increase in manpower has resulted in a dramatic decrease in crime. A nine month comparison of the past two years will show that there has been a 13% reduction in violent crime and a 9.38% reduction in overall crime. In 2008, my administration will strive to continue this trend by aggressively pursuing funds for additional police officers.

In order for our brave members of the police and fire departments to do their jobs safely and efficiently, we must give them the necessary tools and resources. The city made a \$3 million investment in the fire department when it constructed Wilkes-Barre's first new firehouse in over 20 years at Hollenback Park and added three new fire engines and two new ambulances to the department's fleet. Sixteen new police vehicles, including a prisoner transport van and 2 new motorcycles were also purchased.

Investing in Our Business Community

After maintaining fiscal responsibility, the city focused on economic development projects that aimed to inject new life into City of Wilkes-Barre. In 2005, the Pennsylvania Labor and Industry Building relocated 300 workers to downtown Wilkes-Barre and Wilkes University purchased the former call center building on South and South Main Streets, relieving the city's taxpayers of \$14 million in debt obligations.

With the completion of the \$30 million Northampton and Main project, and subsequent opening of R/C Theatres Wilkes-Barre Movies 14, Barnes and Noble Collegiate Bookstore and other new businesses, Wilkes-Barre has reestablished itself as a city with an 18-hour downtown. Completion of more than half of the \$7 million Downtown Streetlight and Streetscape Enhancement Project further strengthened the public's confidence in the downtown by brightening our streets and increasing safety.

This administration will continue to give Wilkes-Barre's residents and visitors reasons to believe in the future of the city in 2008. Work will be completed on the \$22 million Intermodal Transportation Facility, which will include over 750 public parking spaces and will unify buses and taxis to one central location. The third phase of the Downtown Streetlight and Streetscape Enhancement Project will commence, lighting Franklin, Washington, Union and Northampton Streets. This substantial increase in public parking spots and street-level lighting will continue to encourage pedestrian traffic and business growth in the downtown.

Private investments in the downtown have spread to the historic Franklin and Ross Street corridor. The fourth rehabilitated CityVest home recently sold for over market rate and the Cumberland Building has been successfully renovated into 60 residential apartments. Further down Ross Street, area businessman Daniel Siniawa will redevelop the blighted Murray Complex into a residential and lifestyle center. Each of these residential and entertainment options, as well as the lofts and shops at Northampton and Main, aim to attract professionals to downtown.

Over the past year, downtown Wilkes-Barre has become home to several new businesses, including Quizno's Subs, Januzzi's Pizza, Butler Eyecare, Café Toscana and more. Donn Michael's Salon, Capturing Memories by Denice and Tony Di's Pizza have extended retail further down South Main Street. These businesses have brought employees to the city, each of whom patronize other local businesses and contribute to the city's tax base, which benefits our police and fire services citywide. In 2008, we will welcome a new Thai restaurant to Midtown Village and other stores to South Main Street.

In each case, private developers have shown their confidence in the city's future by investing their time, money and resources into the downtown. Rebuilding downtown Wilkes-Barre's retail core will not happen overnight, but I am confident that we are redeveloping the area correctly by cultivating lasting relationships with quality businesses.

Investing in Our Neighborhoods

A common thread among successful cities, like strong economic development programs, is an outstanding quality of life. Since taking office in 2004, my administration has worked diligently to restore Wilkes-Barre's neighborhoods, the heart of our city. We have demanded safer communities by enforcing high property standards. To date, the Community Action Team and other city departments have inspected more than 2,000 properties and posted more than 200 unfit. Over the past four years, the city has demolished over 100 blighted properties from Wilkes-Barre's neighborhoods.

The Pine Ridge Estates housing development now features six townhomes and 21 homes, with two additional single-family homes under construction. In 2008, construction will be completed on *Mill Street Homes*, two affordable, single-family homes at 15 Mill Street. The homes, which are located on the vacant site of the former S & S School, will be environmentally and energy efficient. In each area, these attractive homes will add to the city's efforts to renew its neighborhoods by providing quality housing opportunities for middle income buyers.

My administration has not only repaired our aging infrastructure, but also preserved it for future generations. Over 900 catch basins have been replaced or repaired. The city invested \$5 million to completely reconstruct both the Waller and South Franklin Street Bridges. Construction will soon commence on the Barney, Regent and Sidney Street Bridges in 2008, rebuilding the city's infrastructure and protecting residents from future flooding. Sanitary and storm sewer systems throughout the city have been upgraded and a major sewer diversion project is currently taking place. By the end of 2007, the city will have paved over 130 roads, totaling 24.7 miles and over \$6 million. This ambitious schedule will continue in 2008 with over 25 streets targeted for paving, totaling 4.8 miles and \$1.75 million.

Valuing the availability of recreational offerings in the City of Wilkes-Barre, we have invested over \$500,000 to upgrade Kirby Park and other neighborhood parks. Kirby Park is the region's largest public park, spanning 52 acres and hosting hundreds of thousands of visitors each year. The City of Wilkes-Barre is committed to maintaining this treasure and preserving it for future generations. We will continue this investment in 2008, with \$250,000 in infrastructure upgrades, decorative lighting and electrical advancements.

In 2008, the City of Wilkes-Barre will renovate Coal Street Park into a premier recreational area. Once a landmark, known for its fun activities and family atmosphere, Coal Street Park will again become a destination for residents and visitors. The adjacent Coal Street will be widened into five lanes and extend directly into downtown.

Luzerne County's Riverfront Development Project has made considerable progress over the past year. With a scheduled opening in late 2008, Wilkes-Barre's River Commons will draw residents and visitors to the Susquehanna River. Combined with CityVest's rehabilitation of the Hotel Sterling, the River Street corridor will once again become a fittingly grand entrance to the city.

In addition to capitalizing on our environmental assets, the City of Wilkes-Barre has also advanced itself technologically. Through the cooperation of Frontier and Wire Free Wilkes-Barre, a non-profit partnership between the City of Wilkes-Barre, Luzerne County, King's College, and Wilkes University, high speed wireless services were launched in the downtown just last week. Service will be expanded into Kirby Park and throughout the City of Wilkes-Barre's seven square miles. This wireless initiative will also enhance the police department's ability to deter crime through surveillance cameras installed in strategic locations.

Investing in Wilkes-Barre's Future

With Wilkes-Barre's progress over the past four years, people have a renewed interest in the city and the innovative opportunities it presents. As a community, we have made strides to reverse the negative mindset about the area, promoting a more productive approach to change.

These accomplishments, whether financial or material, would not be possible without partnerships between other elected officials and levels of government, community and business leaders, our local colleges, neighboring municipalities and, most importantly, our residents. I would like to thank the following partners for their continued support and cooperation members of Wilkes-Barre City Council, Luzerne County Chairman Commissioner Greg Skrepenak, Commissioner Rose Tucker, Governor Edward G. Rendell and his staff, Congressman Paul Kanjorski, Senators Bob Casey and Arlen Specter, State Senator Raphael Musto, State Representative Edward Pashinski and the Greater Wilkes-Barre Chamber of Business & Industry.

Despite our collective accomplishments in the City of Wilkes-Barre, my administration will face difficult budget challenges in 2008. Over the past four years, the city has incurred \$8.25 million in damages from natural disasters, forcing us to seek funding for response and recovery efforts. Careful planning, budget reductions and increased productivity in each department will continue to be necessary. We are committed to creating an efficient Wilkes-Barre, both in emergencies and everyday.

This budget will lay the groundwork for another successful year in the City of Wilkes-Barre. Financial stability will once again anchor our future and, as a result, I am pleased to propose no new tax increases for the 2008 fiscal year. During those twelve months, I look forward to turning challenges into opportunities, transforming plans into reality and continuing to lead Wilkes-Barre toward a bright future.