



2021 State of the City

Mayor Paige Gebhardt Cognetti

City Officials, Staff, Citizens of Scranton – and Ryan, Mom & Sloane watching remotely:

Thank you for joining me to discuss the city we all love, what we have accomplished together, and our shared future.

Barely over a year ago, joined by colleagues, friends and family, I promised to restore the trust of the people and govern on their behalf, that a better city was possible, and that I would work tirelessly to deliver for them.

Scranton is a city built on hard work and resilience – a city where we are proud of how hard we work, and the values that flow from that work. Earlier this year, we were blessed to have one of our own inaugurated as the President of the United States, powered and brought there by those core values that serve as not just our moral compass, but that will heal our nation and guide our recovery.

We remember too well when some of our local leaders did not work as hard as we do. When elected officials undermined our trust, the dignity of our hard work and our city's reputation. Our city didn't get headlines for what we did well, but made news because of illegal schemes.

We knew we were facing a crisis due to deep systemic corruption. That crisis was joined shortly by two more crises – a once in a lifetime pandemic, and the ensuing economic recession. And then another – a national awakening to racial inequity that we must continue to address.

This multitude of crises showed the need for a government that does better for the people – and leads based on their needs. No matter whom they are related to or whom they went to school with.

My commitment remains the same today as it was a year ago: That I will work as hard as our people do, make the government do more, and serve the needs of our community. I am working to make us proud again - to fix what was broken, to keep on what worked well, and to always try and make our government worthy of our shared heritage and the future we deserve.

We have many allies in what our movement is fighting for – a council ready to get rid of corruption, residents excited to volunteer and lend their thoughts and talents, and city employees and first responders that faced tremendous challenges to still serve the people through unprecedented crisis. Through it all we have worked with our local government peers, the commonwealth and the federal government to figure out how to do things better. We've worked with partners across the city and the region to pump out information and resources. And we have delivered.

COVID-19

I want to take a moment to acknowledge all of the personal loss we've experienced over the past year. We have lost loved ones and friends, and have been unable to grieve in our traditional customs. Many of us have suffered financial setbacks, with our jobs and businesses. Our normal way of life has been taken from us.

But we came together as a community from the beginning, showcasing the strength of Scranton and Northeastern Pennsylvania. Our trial began with the decision to cancel our beloved St. Patrick's Day Parade – a hallmark of Scranton's culture and a cornerstone of our economy.

As we stood in the Governor's Room with the Parade Committee, City Council, the Chamber of Commerce, Scranton Tomorrow, doctors from Geisinger, Moses Taylor, Regional Hospital and the Medical College to announce the cancellation, I felt the fear of what was ahead but also the comfort of knowing we were facing it together.

Together in a way that is genuine, and in a way that we have seen carry us through this crisis. I sincerely believe that we set a tone that day for partnership that will carry us through any crisis we face down the road.

With our resilience and determination, we are starting to see a light at the end of this tunnel – our numbers of COVID infections are finally trending downward and the

vaccines are on their way. I want to thank you all for your part in this, especially those on the front lines.

When many levels of government failed us on COVID, we did our best to step up as a city. I advocated fiercely for funding from other entities - arguably sometimes quite fiercely.

We passed out PPE, cut red tape and streamlined permitting for Scranton businesses during COVID-19 restrictions, and gave out more than \$1 million in grants to Scranton businesses. We raised \$180,000 for food for our neighbors in collaboration with the Scranton Area Foundation.

We collaborated with non-profit organization Keystone Mission to turn the city's Weston Field House into a 24/7 stay in place shelter for people experiencing homelessness during the pandemic. And we worked to listen, leading a recovery task force and working with other leaders in our region to do more for the people. We're working to set up vaccine a distribution site here in Scranton so that we can get shots in arms and get back to work, school and life as quickly as possible.

As the sun shines today and as we feel the temperature warm up, I know we are all hopeful that we can be together in person again sooner than later.

REFORM – Communication/Openness, Ethics & Hiring

We changed the way government in Scranton worked, to restore the faith of the people. We made great progress in changing a system long run by the same political players, with antiquated infrastructure and technology, and operations; a system formerly operated in the shadow of corruption.

We've tried to make government listen to you more. We've held nearly 60 town halls and over 1,700 meetings. To keep our team here at City Hall accountable and open, we've begun our virtual town halls twice a week and implemented the 311 line that allows the people to report issues within the City with a quick response.

We've brought City Hall to you – quite literally – with our Pop-Up City Halls over the past year, and created social media accounts. My team and I regularly attend City Council caucuses and meetings to listen and thoughtfully try to do more. And we've completely overhauled our website to make information about City operations and data more accessible.

This improved transparency ensures that we're bringing fairness back to our residents and businesses. It also helps us market our City to folks in other places who may be looking for a change.

We crawled into each city vehicle to get VIN numbers to make sure it matched our insurance records; we held an auction to sell vehicles that were sitting at DPW for over a decade; we trudged up West Mountain to look at sources of flooding issues; we stopped plowing streets based on who lives where and started plowing for access to emergency services.

The Ethics Reform we've implemented means that under our leadership the City can't go back to its old practices of public officials working for their own self-interest.

Hiring for City positions has been completely overhauled. To have the best staff on hand to serve our community, it's crucial that we have the most qualified candidates, instead of the most connected, so that's what we have done. Jobs are posted publicly and we consider candidates that have the experience and credentials for each position.

We have eliminated cash payments, and established a confidential whistleblower hotline for city employees to report concerns. We have implemented new oversight controls governing the way your money is spent. We have brought city operations out of the shadow and into the light of transparency.

REFORM – Financial

From Day One we've driven home the message that each dollar is a taxpayer dollar; that a city budget is not a blank check. Our city employees have responded to the call.

Residents have also responded by paying their fair share – and for those who are not paying their fair share, we are implementing more aggressive processes to change that.

We ended 2020 with a budget surplus, and we will keep managing the budget responsibly this year and going forward.

As the pandemic raged last spring, we braced the City for its economic impact. We planned for the worst, making the tough but necessary decision to furlough employees, tightening expenditures across city departments, and working with our financial advisor to craft contingency plans.

As we faced uncertain revenues and as our furloughed employees and their families sacrificed, I chose to lead by example, donating back 5% of my salary to the city beginning in June.

Our economic makeup proved to be more resilient to the COVID economy than that of other cities, and we didn't see the catastrophic losses of some of our peers – but we accelerated cuts to bloated budget items and instilled fiscal discipline across the city. We took this as an opportunity to implement systemic financial responsibility within every City department.

We know that we have to keep our financial foundation steady and cannot overburden our taxpayers any more than they already are. We did not increase any taxes heading into 2021, and are doing all we can to reduce the local tax burden over time.

Our tax policy working group is exploring taxation methods and financial strategies to support a more appealing city for residential and business growth. I will continue my efforts to find a sustainable way to eliminate the business tax altogether, not simply swap one for another, as well as to reduce our onerous wage tax over time.

Together in this group we are working to propose how we pave the way for economic growth while protecting our residents, especially those living on fixed incomes.

Given the headwinds of 2020, we successfully advocated for an extension of our Act 47 status through the end of this year. We appreciate the assistance of the Pennsylvania Economy League and the Department of Community & Economic Development as we work toward exiting at the end of the year.

Exiting Act 47 is not a declaration of victory, as we have a great deal of work ahead to get the city onto a path of long-term financial stability, but it is a significant step in the

right direction and shows that we are putting the processes in place to manage the organization and its finances properly.

Scranton is not alone in facing substantial long-term financial obligations. Municipalities and states across the nation have pension, healthcare, and aging infrastructure bills coming due that we cannot afford.

To help us navigate these challenges we are working with experts, peer cities, economic agencies and groups like the Pennsylvania Municipal League and the U.S. Conference of Mayors.

ECONOMIC RECOVERY

As we face continued uncertainty, we remain prepared to withstand the impacts of this pandemic. This year we have reason to hope for better, with the possibility of a direct federal stimulus for municipalities and with light at the end of the tunnel for resuming more normal business operations.

But just as in 2020, we cannot rely on outside factors. We have to do the hard work ourselves.

We will soon have disbursed over \$1 million in grant funds to small businesses, partnered with Lackawanna College and Scranton Tomorrow to Rally for Restaurants, worked with the Chamber of Commerce to promote our great city, supplied COVID Safe Reopening packets to businesses and organizations, and are aggressive in organizing workforce development in our region so we can match future opportunities with current education options.

We are in close touch with the Biden administration to share what Scranton needs and how we can help them craft policies and programs that will deliver immediate results for families, businesses and for our economic trajectory.

We are not alone as we face challenges. We are in the rooms where ideas for overcoming financial hurdles are discussed, and we will be on the forefront of trying the solutions that can help cities like ours.

PUBLIC SAFETY

None of what we do possible without the public safety professionals in this city. Our police officers and firefighters are out every day and night interacting with people whether they have masks on or not; our public works employees were picking up garbage when we didn't know how easily COVID could be transmitted from physical objects.

When we talk about public safety, we're talking about the most important role of city government. We are very fortunate to have the dedicated teams we have, and that was never clearer than during this public health crisis.

We are incredibly fortunate to live in a city where the response to emergencies is immediate – I am grateful for that as Mayor, but as a taxpayer and especially as a mother to a little girl.

QUALITY OF LIFE & INCLUSION/FAIRNESS

We've focused relentlessly on improving quality of life – in every corner of our city. We repainted crosswalks, replaced old street signs, filled potholes, demolished blighted properties, and made parks better. We worked to help families buy their first homes, and small businesses stay afloat. We launched the Scranton Together Neighborhood Initiative to bring city services into all of the city's neighborhoods through outreach and cleanup events. We established a Mayor's Volunteer Corps to help maintain parks, monitor blight, conduct neighborhood cleanups and participate in neighbor-to-neighbor assistance efforts, among other initiatives.

We realize how vital safe and vibrant neighborhoods are to the fabric of our community; we have worked to empower community groups and partnered with them to support projects such as the revitalization of Pine Brook with United Neighborhood Centers and supporting the efforts of NeighborWorks in West Scranton.

We're looking at how our downtown and neighborhoods connect, working toward murals and street art and gateways that will boost pride not just in Scranton, but in each neighborhood – and the neighborhoods within neighborhoods.

We know that a train to New York is not a pipe dream, but a real possibility. We're advocating for that in real time.

We are thinking big about the city we can be, looking at examples from across the nation of how smaller cities have fostered their arts communities, encouraged entrepreneurs and supported them to build up, taken forgotten properties and made them multiuse attractions and enhanced transportation so that people can work and play more easily.

We focus on *everyone* now. Every pocket of the community. We reach out. We offer resources.

We now raise the Pan-African flag every February to celebrate Black History. We fly the Pride flag. We fly the United Nations flag and the Women's Suffrage flag. We fly the Irish flag and the Italian flag. We aren't afraid of embracing the many cultures, colors, languages and lifestyles that make Scranton come to life.

We want everyone to feel welcome here in Scranton. We have families that have lived here for generations that still don't think they could ever work at City Hall, or get a general contractor permit, or get their stop sign fixed, or get a meeting with the Mayor.

We're changing that. We're listening. To everyone.

We've also worked to make our government fair. We've implemented systemic change to promote accountability and justice – we've changed our revenue collection processes to go after those who don't contribute their fair share – we are prosecuting bad landlords and those who skirt the rules and holding them accountable. We've worked to attract new businesses and families in a time when work from home was more widely used.

We've done all of this while being a good fiscal steward for the people. We finished 2020 with a budget surplus despite compounding crises that faced our city and devastated other municipalities.

FUTURE INITIATIVES

Planning a State of the City address helps you look back, look at the moment we're in, and begs the question – *where are we going?*

We are sailing on seas in our favor right now. Our real estate market is hot. Our brand as a city is improving exponentially. Our native son is sitting in the Oval Office. Our voice matters.

But for all the progress, we still stand just beyond the crossroads.

We have a tremendous amount of work to do to fill every storefront with a thriving small business, to build the welcoming gateways to each of our unique neighborhoods, to attract the marketplaces and the breweries and art spaces that become gathering places for friends and families, to expand our use of our riverfront, to create the neighborhoods, parks and recreation programs for all ages.

We have an obligation to provide superior education for all of our children, and I am grateful for the communication and partnership we have with the Scranton School District.

We are partnering closely on workforce development, in close touch with U of S, Lackawanna, Johnson, Penn State and The Geisinger Medical College, and the Institute for Public Policy.

Our future is only as strong as the plans we put in place now and the young minds we shape. Every kid in Scranton is from the same place as the President – the bar is high and it's on us to give each kid here the ability to achieve their dreams.

CLOSING

2020 was a year with many unexpected challenges, but here in Scranton, we always rise to a challenge. We are resilient – the hard times give us a chance to show how hard we work. In my first year, I am proud of how we came together and focused on how to weather the storm together.

We came into office prepared – now, we are battle-tested and truly prepared for anything.

Together, over the past year, we have done big things. We have made our already great city even greater. I look forward to continuing to work together to make Scranton government work better, and make this city a better, more welcoming place to live work and raise a family.

The state of our city is strong, because it is led by the values of our people – and an unwillingness to compromise those values.

Every day I try to be a Mayor worthy of the job you trusted me with. I try to live up to your work ethic, your decency and your dreams.

We are helping people, whether it's pointing them to a food drive location or fixing a street light or advocating for a project or brainstorming on the big ideas that could catapult our growth.

No day is the same. No problem is too small. No idea is too big.

We are looking to the future with bold vision for how our city can transform and thrive.

These initial 14 months have been challenging to say the least, but I have loved every single day.

I am incredibly proud of the strides we have made and energized about what we can do when we are *not* in the thick of a catastrophic pandemic.

And I could not be up here – we could not do any of this – without the team of city leaders and our 500 employees. I appreciate you.

We Skype with my father back in Oregon every night. He sits in the same family room where my parents talked with my brother and me about fairness, equity, justice, and doing what's right.

It is a true honor to be your Mayor and to be in the fight for good, fair, honest government with you.

Thank you for support, and for your hard work alongside us.

Thank you for your trust.

CITY OF SCRANTON

BY THE NUMBERS

