

2014 SARATOGA SPRINGS STATE OF THE CITY ADDRESS

GIVEN BY MAYOR JOANNE D. YEPSEN

JAUNARY 28, 2014 – 7:00PM, SARATOGA SPRINGS CITY CENTER

Good evening my fellow Saratogians and welcome to the Saratoga Springs City Center. Tonight, as your mayor, it is my distinct honor and privilege to give the 2014 State of the City Address.

First, I want to recognize several current and former elected officials who are with us this evening.

Introductions...

And most importantly, I want to thank my family – my three children: Emma, Laura and Cole and thank you to all of the local businesses that are participating tonight and thank you to all of my fellow citizens who are here with us this evening

We don't need to have a speech, or a formal meeting, for all of us to agree that Saratoga Springs is a very special and very unique place. With our long and storied history, wealth of natural resources, vibrant culture, and prosperous

economy, we are indeed the envy of small cities not only in New York and the Northeast, but across the nation as well. It seems that every time we turn around Saratoga Springs is being named as a “top small city”. Just two weeks ago The Huffington Post named Saratoga Springs as one of “America’s best main streets.” These accolades haven’t come by chance; they have come as the result of years of hard work, and we look forward to building on what we’ve accomplished together.

As you all know, this evening’s address is the *State of the City*, not just the State of the Mayor's Office. We are a commission form of city government and so I was happy that my fellow commissioners contributed to this address and I’m grateful they could be here this evening.

Commissioner of Public Works, Skip Sirocco,

Commissioner of Public Safety, Chris Mathieson,

Commissioner of Accounts, John Frank,

Commissioner of Finance, Michele Madigan

Please stand and be recognized.

I’d also like thank our two county supervisors: Matthew Veitch and Peter Martin, please stand and be recognized.

The State of our City is a busy one.

We are modernizing and renovating our Public Safety Department and the newly configured offices on the second floor of City Hall should be ready for use by summer. We've been successful in expanding our DWI efforts and our Police Department has disrupted several drug houses that have no place in our city. The Fire Department had another successful year in the operation of the ambulance service and the City approved a land acquisition that will allow for a strategically located third fire and EMS station.

DPW is in the final stages of design for the \$2.1 million Ballston Avenue Traffic Improvements Project. This project will enhance overall safety in this area, and features a wider street, new traffic signals and sidewalks. DPW also completed the water treatment plant filter replacement project, ensuring the reliability of the City's water treatment facilities.

Our Accounts Department is recognized nationally for the risk and safety programs and standards it develops. The Assessment Office proactively works with seniors across the community and within the next week, the Assessment Office will be contacting community members by telephone to remind folks of the Senior Citizen Exemption so they get the tax relief they are entitled to.

At a time when many cities and towns are struggling to find resources and balance budgets, our fiscal footing remains sound. Our sales tax collection in 2012 was the highest in Saratoga Springs history and we have very good reason to believe that 2013 may surpass 2012. Our property tax rate has been stable and well within the newly enacted 2% property tax cap. Our city budgets have held property tax increases at bay, while confronting increasing costs associated with pensions and healthcare, and providing critical public services that we all rely on. Our finance department has worked hard to ensure that we have adequately funded reserves in addition to keeping the “AA+”, (read: “double A plus”) bond rating which allows us to finance capital projects at comparatively low interest rates and recognizes our on-going commitment to being a fiscally responsible city.

Ladies and gentlemen, I’m proud to say to you tonight that the state of our city is strong and as your mayor I look forward to making it even stronger in the months and years ahead. We will work together, and we will move our city forward toward a sustainable and prosperous future – not just for a select few, but for everyone.

While we enjoy all that our city has to offer, we cannot and will not rest on our laurels. There is work to do and improvements to be made. Much of what you will hear tonight will mirror what I was saying on the campaign trail. However,

now we are not just talking about it, we are doing it. I have outlined five areas my administration will be focusing our attention on:

I) Open-Government/Transparency:

In a few short weeks, my staff and I have been busy. During the campaign, I promised to put my schedule online – I’ve done it. I assured voters that I would establish open office hours for citizens to come in freely and talk with my staff and me – I’ve done it. I said that we would remove the barrier in the mayor’s office that served as both a physical and symbolic barrier between the mayor and the citizens – and in the coming weeks we will be doing just that. To be even more transparent, and cut down on FOIL requests, I suggest that all study reports by consultants be made available in the city library and city hall. And, in the coming weeks, I will work with the City Council to clean up the way we appoint citizens to our boards and committees so that appointments cannot be made in the dark of night, or in the final hours of a mayor’s tenure in City Hall. Our citizens deserve non-partisan openness and transparency and they will get nothing less.

II) Economic Development/Business:

My administration will be particularly aggressive in seeking input from our business community in ways that has not been done before. Our city cannot reach its potential if the private sector and public sector are isolated in their respective silos with little-to-no communication. To the contrary, the path to augmenting our

prosperity lies in building public-private partnerships that can open the lines of communication and facilitate actions between city government and businesses. **So tonight**, I'm happy to announce the creation of the first-ever **Saratoga Springs Business Advisory Council**.

This 15-member council will be made up of businessmen and businesswomen who will be tasked with creating recommendations to cut red tape; eliminate unnecessary regulations; create sustainable economic growth and job creation; and more effectively market the city's economic and cultural assets.

I'm very pleased to announce that Colleen Holmes of Wheatfields Restaurant, Matt McCabe of Saratoga Guitar, Rich Ferguson of Saratoga National Bank, and Alisa Dalton of The Dalton Law Firm have agreed to be the founding members of this council. This will be an on-going, standing committee to bridge the gap between City Hall and the business community, foster economic growth and encourage prosperity; the Business Advisory Council will prepare their first report of recommendations for presentation to the Mayor and the City Council publicly **by May 30th**.

Better communication is a two-way street and City Hall can do more. For example, the City currently offers loans for various business projects, but we haven't done enough to market them. Now we will. We will look to have more

“Project Roundtables” so that our city staff and private businesses can sit down together and talk about what both sides need so we can reduce unnecessary bureaucratic back-and-forth. The City does not proactively recruit new businesses. Now we will. The City Comprehensive Plan is identifying three areas of the City for future growth but we don’t have a proactive economic plan that can be implemented for those three areas. We soon will. How? By redirecting our City staff and boards and making new efforts to leverage regional partnerships - because great things can happen when you leave politics at the door and get passionate, energetic people in the same room.

A shining example of this is the “Experience Saratoga” event that the Saratoga County Chamber of Commerce is partnering with our city on. Over two days in early April, officials from other cities and towns will have the opportunity to come to our downtown, experience all it has to offer first-hand, and speak with local business owners about how they can replicate our success as a vibrant downtown. I want to thank Todd Shimkus and the Chamber and the many local businesses for all the work they’ve done on this event and I look forward to showcasing our city with them in April.

To ensure more great results, we will hold regular meetings between the Mayor and our private sector leaders of the Chamber of Commerce, SEDC, the DBA, the

City Center, and the Convention and Tourism Bureau. Greater communication and partnership can, and will, benefit our business community.

As we build the public-private partnerships, let me assure you that, under my leadership, City Hall will do its part as well. My team is already proactively seeking out new grants and thinking of better ways to spend precious public funds. We will work to resolve the six outstanding labor contracts we inherited as soon as possible. Auditors have told us that letting labor contracts linger is bad for our city's finances and it's bad for employee morale as well.

At his Executive Budget address last week in Albany, Governor Cuomo proposed a two-year freeze on property taxes with certain conditions. For the first year, any locality staying within the 2% property tax cap would be eligible for the freeze; the second year would require localities to take steps toward reducing costs through shared services and consolidations. My fellow citizens, and my fellow City Council members, let's not let this opportunity pass us by! Let's hold the line on spending, let's explore opportunities for shared services and greater efficiencies, **and let's make sure Saratoga Springs is in a position to take advantage of this type of tax relief.**

III) Sustainability and Comprehensive Planning:

As we work diligently toward growing our economic success, we must endeavor to grow our city in a balanced and sustainable way. Saratoga Springs has worked hard over the years, one day at a time, to establish a quality of life with a thriving downtown core and once again, the current Comprehensive Plan Committee has identified “The City in the Country” as the vision that summarizes what we want our city to be.

In contrast, during the housing boom, communities in Florida, and Nevada, and Arizona witnessed unbelievable growth in housing and business, only to realize a short time after that their supply greatly outweighed any realistic demand; and communities that were growing by leaps and bounds one day, were full of closing businesses and unoccupied houses the next. And while our city is on a different scale in a different place, we would be foolish not to heed the lessons of other places that have grown too fast and too recklessly. We want to keep Saratoga Springs on the right track.

Accordingly, I am going to make our Comprehensive Planning process a TOP priority with the goal of having a product we can all be proud of. Let’s not fear a forward-thinking vision; let’s embrace it. To help us get there, I will count on the

current 15-member committee and, tonight I'm pleased to announce **Geoff Borneman as our new chairman** and **Jamin Totino, as our new vice-chairman.** The first meeting of the 2014 Committee effort will be February 10th at 6 p.m. and I would encourage all those who are interested to attend.

As Mayor, and a mother of three, I am very interested in attracting more young professionals to Saratoga Springs. Research shows we must offer them a walkable, bike-friendly community and that's why I've ordered my staff to look high and low for grant funding that can help complete the Geyser Road Trail and advance the newly designed Green belt trail around the City and we look forward to working with Supervisor Matt Veitch and the County to advance our trail systems.

As our downtown core continues to grow, we must find other ways to increase the volume of people and transport them conveniently to downtown. Our community needs to be good stewards of our natural resources and I will work to ensure that our city has enough greenspace for generations to come.

It's been 26 years since the Department of Environmental Conservation issued it's report on environmental conditions at Loughberry Lake, our primary water supply, and it's watershed. Let's work with DEC to update this information so we have a clear idea of where we stand with our water quality and quantity.

The funding for the project at the waterfront property purchased by the City is in jeopardy. The New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation has not received adequate documentation from the previous administration regarding any work that has been done. It is because of that lethargic attitude we are at risk of losing hundreds of thousands of dollars in reimbursable state funds. The City has 15 months to fast track this project and I intend to do my best to make up for lost time. We've already had several meetings on this project and I will again be having a meeting this week with the involved parties on an implementation strategy with strict deadlines and budget constraints. It is imperative that we try to save our credibility with the State and we show them Saratoga Springs is a good investment; let's get this done and give our citizens a waterfront park they can enjoy.

Economic development and sustainability are not mutually exclusive and we can have both. Let's work together to grow our economy in a balanced way so that 20, 30, 40 years from now people are still talking about our city the way they talk about it today, not a city that became a victim of its own success because it lacked the foresight or the strategic vision to stay balanced and on track.

IV) CONSTITUENCY SERVICE:

While we work toward building a sustainable and more prosperous economy, we must realize that prosperity often does not trickle down to some of our most vulnerable citizens. In America today, income inequality is on the rise and social mobility is on the run. This is not my own assessment of the socio-economic reality; it is a simple fact. And while Saratoga Springs is thriving in so many ways, we are not immune to having people who are down on their luck, struggling to make ends meet, and coping with mental illness that is beyond their control. These people are our fellow citizens and we, as a community, have an obligation to look out for them the same way we look out for business owners and taxpayers. I take great pride, both as a citizen and as your mayor, in starting a much-needed and long over-due Code Blue program right here in Saratoga Springs, because YES we have homelessness, YES we have people struggling, and NO it's not okay for them to sleep outside in extreme weather conditions. To date we have had over 30 different guests, 17 code blue nights, and over 150 volunteers. This would not have happened without our non-profit colleagues and partners. I would ask that the members of the **Code Blue Steering Committee to stand and be recognized.**

Too often, at all levels of government, our senior citizens and veterans are left behind and are treated like second-class citizens. As both a citizen and elected

official I have worked tirelessly to do more for these deserving populations and my tenure as mayor will be no different. In my first 100 days, we will set up a special help desk in a central location where seniors can go for answers to their questions regarding housing, Medicaid, and resources. We look forward to working with the Senior Citizens Center and the Mayor's Senior Advisory Council to even better address the needs of our seniors.

The brave men and women who risk their lives and leave their families and communities behind should have some place they can turn; they deserve elected officials that understand their needs. So we will count on our newly formed Vietnam Commemorative 50th Anniversary Committee to help bridge the gap between civilian life and military service AND to serve as advisors to the city council on what we can do to help our veterans and their families. I look forward to partnering with newly elected Supervisor Peter Martin, who was recently named to the Veterans' Affairs Committee on the County Board to explore new ways we can help this most deserving population.

Those in our community who live in public housing deserve better. That's why in the near future I will be meeting with board members of the Saratoga Springs Housing Authority and coming up with solutions to improve the legal and general working relationship between the Board and the City Council.

V). HORSE RACING AND SPORTS TOURISM:

Nothing is more identified today with our beloved city than world-class horse racing. This “sport of kings” has played such a significant role in our city’s economy and culture and just last summer we were proud to celebrate 150 years of racing at the Spa. Once again I want to congratulate the 150 Committee for a huge success. There is no doubt that Horse Racing and gambling are significant parts of the history and culture of this City. However, it’s not the only thing we are. We are a City devoted to prosperity, civic engagement, arts and culture and the preservation of our environment and our history.

But with the passage of Proposition #1 in New York State, we are at a crossroads, and we are at the mercy of the State. Our community and local elected officials are nervous about having little-to-no voice in this decision that rests between the Governor, his citing panel and the commercial operators, and rightfully so. As Mayor, I promised to represent all and that’s just I have been doing and will continue to do so, but our city is divided on this issue. And while there is a spirited debate taking place, let us not overlook the common ground that I believe already exists.

As I said on Inauguration Day, a Las-Vegas style casino has no place in Saratoga Springs. I stood by that sentiment then, and I stand by it now. And

from my many conversations with our citizens on this topic, I think that is something that we can agree on. Another thing that most of us can agree on is the tremendous frustration we feel when we cannot come together and control our own destiny as a city. And nobody can deny that one expanded gaming casino license will be issued in our 8-county region, either in Saratoga Springs, or somewhere close by. That is not up for debate; it is happening.

With these basic agreements, we can then work from there to try to negotiate terms and conditions for a **more practical, more moderate solution** to prevent radical change to our City in the Country. A solution that says “NO” to a massive event space that will take away business from our City Center; a solution that says “NO” to a colossal casino hotel; a solution that says “NO” to an untold number of restaurants and shops that could threaten the vitality of downtown, but a solution that says “YES” to creating good jobs; “YES” to ensuring that harness racing stays alive and well in Saratoga Springs where it belongs and where it’s been since 1847; a solution that says “YES” to increased city revenue and lower taxes and a solution that features a group of owners who will promise to work through our city zoning and planning process and who will work proactively toward not just the betterment of their own business, but the betterment of downtown Saratoga Springs as well.

If Albany and the casino industry are interested in having that very fair and very reasonable conversation then they have my undivided attention, but until then I remain very concerned about this issue, and I will continue to listen to all our citizens. Because even though Albany and the governor's citing panel have the final determination, we will do everything in our local power to have our voices heard. Being divisive and disingenuous will get us nowhere and I implore all of you to find common ground and think about how we can maximize the precious little input we have. And I want to assure our citizens that they will have a mayor who will keep fighting for downtown; keep fighting for horse racing and keep fighting to maintain our seat at the table so our community can have a say in what's best for City of Saratoga Springs.

As we witness our city change and grow, and ponder the pros and cons of an expanded casino, **let us not forget horse racing and the pivotal role it continues to play in our lives today.** Let's look at the facts: 1) The VLTs saved Harness Racing and all the jobs and the 1200 horsemen who depend on our Harness Track for their livelihood. 2) The VLTs at Aqueduct protected further decline in the Thoroughbred business in and around Saratoga County and propped up NYRA when pink slips were being handed out, breeders were moving and business was closing; 3) 10 % of our City budget was lost when Albany decided to change the distribution formula of VLT funds. Today, instead of \$3.5 M, our City budget

gets \$1.8 M. I am not comfortable leaving 10% or any percent of our City's finances and future fiscal stability in the hands of Albany politics.

That's why I am asking key members of the Thoroughbred and Harness industry – **trainers, breeders, and riders** - to serve on City Racing Advisory Council. The Racing Advisory Council will be key in determining the effects of the state gaming law on the horse racing industry. Now more than ever we need to remember what is really important to our local economy and bring horse racing back to the center of this conversation.

On the Council will be well-respected and very knowledgeable leaders in the industry -- Bill Wilmot, Joe McMahan, Mickey McGivern, Paul Kelley and Bill Mott to name a few.

We must all be custodians of this great sport, not merely spectators, and as long as I'm mayor, horseracing – harness and thoroughbred -- will be a top priority for the City of Saratoga Springs.

As I repeatedly have said, our City has a balanced package of assets but we must continue to find ways to diversify our future and rely less on gambling money that may not be sustainable. I intend to ramp up the leadership of our beloved Visitor's Center (Heritage Area) to better reach its potential as a business, cultural,

entrepreneurial portal. There is more revenue to produce and more services that can be provided to educate people and grow the pride of Saratoga Springs. One way is to better utilize the Visitor's Center as a hub for the healing community including a full-fledge effort to bring the spring waters back to the forefront. A second way is to create a Makers market and promote local products, especially those made right here in Saratoga Springs.

Also, sports tourism has a great future in Saratoga. We must work closely with the new organization growing out of the Convention and Tourism Bureau. My administration will develop a "Recreation and Sports Master Plan" to enhance our tourism efforts and better serve our year-round residents' needs. When someone comes here to run a 5K, or play in a tournament, or to watch their children's event they have an opportunity see our city and there's a good chance they will want to come back and visit us. A Blue Ribbon Committee I am establishing will consist of each sport that is played in Saratoga Springs from Baseball to Polo to Crew to enable closer communications, more coordination and collaboration among sporting organizations and teams and a more efficient use of dollars. Founding members of the newly formed blue ribbon committee are: Greg Griskowitz, Bob Mansier, Meg Kelly and Eric Catalino.

Last summer, we celebrated the 150th anniversary of horse racing at the Spa. Next year, we will celebrate the 100th anniversary of our incorporation as a city. And to ensure that this Centennial milestone is celebrated in true Saratoga fashion, I'm happy to announce that Mary Lou Whitney and John Hendrickson have agreed to chair our 100th anniversary committee. Many community members have already expressed interest in working with them to establish a full program of activities to celebrate all that Saratoga Springs has to offer.

In closing, I stand before you tonight as your mayor because on November 5th, voters made a choice. They chose a mayor who campaigned on open government, transparency, accountability, fairness, and most importantly they made a choice to have a mayor who listens to, and represents, each and every citizen of this great city. For me, these were not empty campaign promises, or catchy talking points – they are the foundation on which I intend to govern and I will ask all my colleagues in City Hall to join me. Let's make city government more professional and more productive! Let's grow our economy in a sustainable way! Let's protect horse racing! And let's have a city that looks out for all citizens, not just a select few!! It's what our citizens have asked for and it is what they deserve.

Thank you all for coming tonight, get home safe, and god bless you all.

Thank you!

