



**City of Cortland
Scott Steve
Mayor**

25 Court Street, Cortland, NY 13045
Website: www.cortland.org

Telephone – (607) 753-0872

Fax – (607) 756-4644

**State of the City Report
Submitted to the Common Council by Mayor Steve
March 31, 2023**

The City of Cortland's 2023 State of the City report shares with residents, stakeholders and leaders in the community the challenges being met and the opportunities before us.

I'd like to thank the members of the Common Council for their work and contributions this past year. I value the contributions of each member of the Common Council and the collaborative, non-partisan approach they bring to improving our City. Anyone watching Common Council meetings can see the open-minded deliberations and effective representation of their constituents.

Thank you to all the Department Heads and their staff for their expertise and insights as I delved for a deeper understanding of the day-to-day operations and protocols of each department. The City's employees too often go unappreciated for their work and deserve our thanks.

Prior to taking office, I was vocal about what I perceived to be the problems and challenges facing our city. I was cognizant of the fact that the work to get Cortland back on course would be arduous. While my initial assessments were correct, they did not entirely encompass the full scope of the difficulties we faced.

I believe that challenging situations require difficult conversations to inspire meaningful solutions. In 2022 a lot of difficult conversations were had in City Hall. After a year of acclimation, adjustment, and prioritizing need, it is time to not only reflect on the past twelve months, but to put collective solutions to work as we plan our city's future.

Another pressing issue of 2022 was the urgent need to address the steady rise in the homeless population. Poverty, lack of affordable housing, absence of accessible and reasonably priced physical and mental health care, and surging rates of addiction are the predominant contributing factors. The absence of City leadership on this problem is a disservice not only to the forgotten homeless population, but to the taxpayers as well.

Homelessness affects all of us. It affects us economically, it affects our quality of life, and it affects our moral senses. The costs to taxpayers include the over-use of community services, such as our healthcare facilities, ambulance service, city police department, and local community resources, such as our parks and public library. Finding and implementing the funds and resources to effectively undertake this problem is daunting, but it must be done.

Our city is fortunate to have a police department staffed with individuals dedicated to protecting and preserving the safety and security of everyone. It is essential that they are well-trained to do their jobs and are kept up to date on new approaches and techniques in handling our frequently changing demographics. Emphasis is now being placed on crisis assessment and intervention, de-escalation tactics, and sensitivity when interacting with those who may have a mental health condition or substance abuse/addiction issue. Through on-going instruction, our officers are maintaining the skills necessary to handle the homeless and transient population in a respectful and compassionate way.

A task force comprised of various local non-profit and governmental agencies will address this crisis in our city. Together we are working to find solutions to alleviate this problem. Additionally, I have met with several state and federal elected officials to ensure that they are aware of our situation. Senator Schumer has visited Cortland twice recently to announce funding for our community to help combat the mental health and drug addiction challenges we face daily.

Last year was a banner year for road construction and infrastructure improvements. We saw the successful completion of the Clinton Avenue Gateway project, as well as the beginning of the \$10,000,000 Downtown Revitalization Initiative. In addition, the city's DPW was able to proactively repave 17 city streets, replace curbing on several, and install 85 ADA compliant pedestrian curb ramps utilizing federally allocated CHIPS funds.

This past week construction season began with the Downtown Revitalization Initiative (DR) I project as our main focus. The city was awarded this grant in 2017 and project plans were completed in 2022 shortly after the beginning of my term. Project delays caused unnecessary cost increases. This construction season will be challenging. It will cause traffic disruptions downtown and present logistical hurdles to business owners and their patrons.

At this time we are working to mitigate these problems. The Common Council approved hiring the Cortland County Convention and Visitor's Bureau to provide promotional services to keep the community informed about construction information and to implement an incentives program to attract people downtown through the "Crown City Rising" platform. To enhance the idea of downtown as a destination, we are implementing short-term and long-term business district parking solutions and programs.

Last year we created a more efficient and improved city trash removal program. Bags placed at the curb for pick-up were often torn up by crows and rodents, while recyclables placed in uncovered bins littered the streets. Residents who were unable to afford blue bags would allow trash to collect in garages, basements and back yards contributing to an on-going rodent problem in the city. In January we implemented a new two tote system for trash and recyclables. There has been a learning curve for some residents, but just two months into the program and there is already a noticeable improvement in the amount of litter in our streets.

We are dedicated to continuing to invest time and resources in areas that improve our city's appearance while nurturing our existing infrastructure. We have implemented daily street sweeping and will purchase

a new street sweeper that will make daily rounds to not only clean the streets, but to also remove leaves and debris from the storm drains to help alleviate flooding. We will continue to proactively remove diseased trees, trim branches away from power lines, and keep creek and riverbanks cleared of bushes and underbrush. The well-received fire hydrant painting initiative led by the Youth Bureau and Fire Department will continue.

Abandoned, dilapidated, and nuisance properties had been a growing problem, taking away from our otherwise vibrant neighborhoods. We have implemented strategies for rehabilitating these properties and putting them back on the tax rolls. The Code Enforcement office continues to actively address other blight properties and concerns. The City will continue to provide municipal loans and grants for the purchase and renovation of these properties. Another strategy is to work with non-profits which are more likely to recognize the need for equitable development and strengthening the local community in meaningful, albeit untraditional, ways. A local agency has shown interest in exploring the possibility for a pilot program that could meet their clients' housing needs. Rehabilitating these vacant homes to restore them to their full potential will ultimately benefit the entire community.

We have increased funding for the City's Sidewalk Replacement Program. Eligible homeowners receive 50% of sidewalk replacement costs, helping to ease the financial burden of this necessary, but often neglected, home repair. This savings has shown to be a great motivator for property maintenance, as the program was highly successful in 2022 and we are anticipating the same enthusiasm this year. Property owners may also avail themselves to a new initiative allowing sidewalk replacement costs to be spread out over five-years on property tax bills. Additionally, sewer/water line replacement costs may also be paid over a five-year period. Programs such as these encourage homeowners to maintain their property, make long-term repairs more affordable and improve the curb appeal and value of their homes.

Investing time and resources in our city parks promotes health, generates community involvement and improves our quality of life. Last year saw extensive park improvements. Yaman Park was the beneficiary of retaining wall replacements, refurbishment of deteriorating buildings, as well as a brand-new walking trail encircling the entire park. This year, the Yaman Park playground will be upgraded. A new pavilion and shade structure were added at Suggett Park.

This year plans are on track for the beginning of an exciting makeover at Randall Park. Beaudry Park is slated for the installation of a new backstop at the softball field as well as work on the basketball court. Plans for a much anticipated dog park are underway and will hopefully become a reality this year.

Regularly upgrading and properly maintaining our city parks is just one positive step towards achieving healthier living and reinforcing a sense of pride in our community. Another step that is currently in discussion is connecting our city parks with a walking trail system. Adding more trails and bike paths is an excellent way to encourage residents to enjoy the outdoors while taking advantage of all of Cortland's great resources. The proposed first phase of the project would see the area under the Interstate 81 overpass area cleaned up to connect Yaman's new walking trail to the footbridge over the Tioughnioga River. A trail system through the city isn't just a great way to promote health and fitness but would also be an aesthetically pleasing addition to Cortland that utilizes already available resources.

The Waterworks is another city-owned resource that is currently under-utilized. Potentially transforming the Waterworks building into a science center would be an incredible asset to the community, as it would provide an environment for education and exploration. The hands-on exhibits and interactive displays at the center would appeal to all ages and serve as a fascinating and memorable resource for both individuals

and families alike. By incorporating elements such as field trips and student volunteers from SUNY Cortland and area schools, this space may even become an essential part of the city's educational system. Additionally, the 53 acres of woodland at the Waterworks is an ideal location for extending the proposed walking trail system within the city.

Taking a step back to review the past year, while exploring ideas for the coming year, we know that positive outcomes and a renewed sense of hope is attainable with hard work and planning. By facing the city's problems, we are starting to see results and are at the beginning of exciting opportunities for long term, fiscally responsible growth, revitalized neighborhoods, more easily attained human services, and improved quality of life. Through innovative programs and ideas, we are successfully laying the foundation for a solid and sustainable future.

An example of a large and complex challenge that the City has faced is the former Apex Tools location on Cleveland Street. Prior to 2022, the city had hired and paid three separate firms to clear the nearly nine-acre site, with no results. Over a three-week period in August, during Phase I, a work crew hauled over 4,500 tons of construction debris and demolition material from the site to the Cortland County Landfill for disposal. During this time independent environmental monitoring was conducted on both the air around the site and the material that was removed. During Phase II of the project the Cortland County Industrial Development Agency in partnership with the City of Cortland will conduct additional testing of the site to determine the presence of any underground contaminants. If pollution is identified the IDA will work with State and Federal resources to fully remediate the site for future redevelopment.

While planning for and successfully implementing this clean-up in nine short months had its challenges, the quick removal of this blight was imperative, and has made a positive impact on the community and enhanced the quality of life for so many on the East Side. This project is a model for how efficiently things can be accomplished with strong leadership, collaboration, and consistent follow-through.

Issues we will address this year include sales tax negotiations, shared services with the County of Cortland and other municipalities, a more efficient and environmentally sound way to transport County landfill leachate run off to the City Wastewater Treatment facility, supporting the staffing and resource needs of City departments, consolidating and upgrading City facilities, and improving the City's finances and operations with the help of a newly hired City Administrator.

The forward trajectory that we are on bodes well for Cortland, and while we should all be proud, it's not yet time to celebrate. There is still much to do and for now we need to roll up our sleeves and continue the task at hand. In 2023 we will continue striving for excellence and investing in our city's future.