

## **CITY MANAGER'S MESSAGE**

"Status of the Administration"

(Delivered to the Corning City Council on February 5, 2024)

### **INTRODUCTION**

This is the twenty-seventh annual report on the Status of the Administration which I have presented to the City Council as required by the City Charter.

I am pleased to report that our finances, which are at the core of our operations, remain stable as a result of ongoing financial planning and fiscally conservative management of the City's resources. In order to maintain the financial stability we have enjoyed for several years, we need to continue generating the resources necessary to fund local services through fair taxation and fee schedules, and through external resources such as State aid while maintaining a conservative expenditure posture.

Since converting to a professional form of government in 1995, we have significantly improved our financial controls, planning, and transparency. This takes constant work and discipline. One of the resources that is assisting us in this effort is the new computerized accounting system the City Council funded in 2021. We are still learning how to use all of the features, but so far, it is helping to modernize our financial administration and improve transparency and accountability.

Concerning our administrative stability, we have experienced a high level of turnover in the management team over the past two years. We have a relatively newly appointed Police Chief, Finance Director, Public Works Director and Confidential Secretary to the City Manager. These are all key management positions which take a lot of time and effort to acclimate those selected to expectations through continual mentoring. Although we are in a period of transition, I am confident that they will all successfully make the transition to be cohesive team members and help lead the organization.

Overall, despite the transitions happening within the management team, I'm pleased to report that we made a lot of progress in 2023. Before we look at the challenges and opportunities we have ahead, I would like to review a few of our many recent accomplishments.

### **2023 ACCOMPLISHMENTS**

**Property Tax Distribution:** In 2023, we successfully implemented a City-wide property reassessment project. It is important to again note that a revaluation of assessments did not generate additional revenue. The assessments are only used for the fair distribution of the tax levies set by the City Council, School Board and County Legislature. I would like to thank Barbabra Roberts for her leadership to implement this project with minimal complaints, and the care she and Assessing Clerk Jenn Hickey showed while assisting property owners navigate the process.

**Senior and Disability Exemptions:** The City provides exemptions on portions of residential assessments for Senior Citizens based on incomes to assist our most vulnerable populations with property taxes. In 2023, the City Council increased the income limits for the senior citizens exemption in order to allow more people to qualify and added a new exemption to provide some relief to those homeowners having a qualifying disability.

**Northside Place:** In 2023, after several years of delay, this project finally began proceeding forward at a rapid pace. The developer, David Reidman, is building 25 single-family homes to be offered on a rental basis. With the redevelopment of an entire City block, this project has the potential to be a catalyst to spark renewed investment on the Northside. It will provide another housing option for people to choose from, especially families that may not be ready to purchase a home or are newly relocating to the community.

**Surplus Property Committee:** A couple of years ago, we began inventorying surplus properties owned by the City that have no current or foreseeable future municipal use. Most of these are small parcels that aren't developable but may have benefit to neighboring property owners. Last year, the Surplus Property Committee made recommendations to the City Council about the disposition of these properties which were ultimately adopted.

In the next few weeks, we will begin contacting the first round of properties owners. Once we reach agreement with prospective buyers the final sale/transfer of each parcel will need approval from the City Council. In total, there are 15 properties to be sold or transferred.

**Police Department Canine Unit:** In 2023, we established a new canine unit in the Police Department. This resource will be helpful in areas such as traffic stops and tracking lost persons. It will also help serve as an ambassador for the department to build closer relations with the public. Officer Chris Clair was selected as our canine handler, and our new police canine was named "Mikey" after former Lt. Michael Schwartz who passed away soon after retirement. Lt. Schwartz was a valued member of our department being awarded two medals of merit during his tenure. Naming our new canine after him is a fitting tribute to honor his memory. I appreciate the support from the City Council on this new initiative and all of the hard work by the Crystal City PBA to help develop the program and raise over \$20,000 for its implementation.

**Dash Camera and LPR Replacements:** This past year, we replaced the dash cameras and automated license plate readers in our police cruisers which were aging and becoming unreliable. We installed new technology through Axon, the makers of our body-worn cameras, that combines a dash camera and automated license plate reader into one unit. The images captured by these devices are automatically uploaded to the cloud storage system we currently use for the Department's body-worn cameras. Consolidating the body camera, mobile dash cam and LPR data onto the Axon platform will provide increased reliability and easier retrieval of video, reducing some of the burden on the Department's personnel.

**Body-Worn Cameras:** In 2022, we were able to implement a body-worn camera program in the Police Department. These cameras capture interactions our officers have with the public and are stored on a cloud-based server to make data easy to retrieve. This past year, we added a new

livestream feature that allows supervisors to monitor the cameras remotely whenever the cameras are actively recording. This will provide for a greater level of supervision and training.

**FEMA Assistance to Firefighters Grant:** Within the last few months, the Fire Department has replaced ten (10) sets of bunker gear that had reached the end of their service life. This gear was paid for by a Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Assistance to Firefighters Grant in the amount of \$35,239. These replacements help us continue our effort to ensure the personal protective equipment issued to employees meets current National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) standards.

**Health Worker Bonus Program:** In 2023, we began implementing New York State's Health Care and Mental Hygiene Worker Bonus Program for qualified employees. The 2022-23 New York State Budget included \$1.3 Billion for this program to make payments for recruitment and retention bonuses to certain health care and mental hygiene workers. The program awards bonuses to eligible workers who make less than \$125,000 annually and remain in their positions for at least six months. Qualified employees have already been reimbursed for the first round of funding, and we have submitted the application for the second round of funding. This new mandate has taken a significant amount of staff time to engage New York State and to administer.

**Spay and Neuter Clinic:** In March of 2023, we launched the Spay and Neuter Clinic for cats. To date, we have provided services for 211 cats (79 male and 132 female) through the Chemung County SPCA. Although it will take a few years to begin curbing the stray cat population, this is a significant step towards addressing the problem. City Clerk Mary Farmer and her Sr. Account/Clerk Jenn Schack have done an excellent job administering the program. Mary and Jenn have taken a lot of pride in being able to offer these services, helping citizens to fill out the required application, scheduling the appointments, and working with the SPCA to coordinate our efforts.

**2023 Street Paving Program:** We had another successful street paving season in 2023, completing approximately 56 blocks of streets and alleys, as well as 4 parking lots totaling \$2,743,875. I anticipate another strong paving season in 2024 if the final State budget includes similar amounts of funding as the current fiscal year.

**Corning Housing Partnership (CHP):** It has been another productive year for the Corning Housing Partnership (CHP). In 2023, we completed improvements to eight properties using \$156,306 of CHP funding to leverage \$233,636 of private investment. This totals \$389,942 of improvements. This has been a successful public-private partnership between the City of Corning, Three Rivers Development Foundation and Arbor Housing and Development. As I've mentioned to you in the past, our current agreement expires this year, and the partnership has decided to put the program on hold temporarily until we complete the Comprehensive Plan update which will help us decide how best to move forward.

**Transportation Study:** We completed the transportation study with Steuben County on the feasibility of consolidating the City and County bus systems to improve efficiency and service. The study was funded by a \$10,000 grant from New York State matched with \$10,000 of City

and County funding. The findings of the study will now be used to inform the transportation section of the Comprehensive Plan.

**Transportation Center Lease:** We were able to renew the lease for the for the retail space in the Transportation Center in November with Quick Ship Corning LLC which owns the UPS franchise. Having a retail establishment not only provides some income to the City to help offset a portion of the expenses, but more importantly it alleviates the need for the City to hire additional staff.

**DOT Shared Services Agreement:** This past year, we were able to update our shared services agreements with the New York State Department of Transportation. DOT has a goal to have an open shared services agreement in place with every municipality in our region, so that in the time of an emergency, the needs of communities can be addressed immediately without waiting for agreements to be processed. DOT has been an excellent partner with local government in our area and I look forward to continuing to work with them.

**Houghton Plot Rights-of-Way Cleanup Agreement:** After years of negotiations, the City and Corning Incorporated finally reach agreement on the responsibilities and process for cleaning-up soil contaminants in the City's rights-of-way located within the Houghton Plot. The agreement addresses each parties' obligations when performing planned or emergency excavations. At its core, the agreement recognizes that it is Corning Incorporated's responsibility to meet the Department of Environmental Conservation's clean-up objectives.

**Flight Center:** In 2023, we finished the installation of the launch pad, kiosk, and windsock at the new Flight Center in Stewart Park which is one of the many low-cost ideas from the City's Parks Strategy. The Recreation Department has been continuing to work on expanding the programming. The new Flight Center is an excellent way to introduce young kids to the wonders of flight and help build their self-esteem.

**Code Enforcement Software:** This past year, we selected a vendor to replace the Code Enforcement database which is over 20 years old and uses Microsoft Access software. The software has become obsolete, and we have regular issues with reliability and support. The Planning Department researched various alternatives and selected the South Central Planning & Development Commission from Louisiana, that has a product being used by various code officials across the nation. This software will: 1) assist in streamlining the building application process; 2) track inspections and complaints; and 3) accommodate planning, zoning and signage applications. It will also make it easier for the public to submit permit applications and to schedule inspections. We are now in the implementation phase of the project which should be complete by this summer.

**80 Norman Street Demo:** In August, we demolished the burned house at 80 Norman Street with the assistance of Steuben County addressing this blight for the neighborhood. The City paid for demolition and disconnecting the water and sewer utilities. Steuben County hauled the debris to the County landfill and waived the tipping fees. This is one example of how Steuben County regularly partners with us to help make service delivery more affordable. The property will now

be disposed of as we work through the surplus property list the City Council approved a few months ago.

**Community Grant:** In 2023, we were able to secure a grant from Corning Community Impact and Investment (formerly known as Corning Enterprises) in the amount of \$150,000. This grant was provided with the stipulation that it would be used for the following specific purposes:

1. \$75,000 for Green Infrastructure Engineering Design work to further the Stormwater and Green Infrastructure Plan for Denison Park that is underway with a National Fish and Wildlife Foundation grant.
2. \$45,000 for three years of funding for Community Planning and GIS software. The City staff has identified a map-based platform (Building Blocks) that integrates municipal data from multiple sources for community planning which could be accessed by various departments.
3. \$30,000 towards the upgrade of the City's drone program for hardware and software.

### **UPCOMING CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES**

As you can see there is much to celebrate from the past year. We have some additional challenges and opportunities ahead of us for 2024.

**State Revenue Sharing:** Governor Hochul's Executive Budget, which was released a couple of weeks ago, calls for no increase in the Aid & Incentives to Municipalities (AIM) program despite touting the budget "increases annual School Aid by \$825 million (2.4 percent), for a record total of \$35.3 billion." If the Governor's Budget is adopted as proposed it will be 14 years in a row with no additional AIM funding. In FY09, we received \$1,622,300 of AIM funding. We now receive \$1,499,566, a 7.6% reduction. We need to continue to advocate through the New York Conference of Mayor and Municipal Officials (NYCOM) to at least restore our funding to FY09 levels. If restoration of funding can be achieved, we should then turn our attention to seeking annual increases indexed to inflation. This continues to be one of NYCOM Finance Committee's top priorities.

**Tax Cap:** Last year, the Senate and Assembly passed legislation, introduced at NYCOM's request, to modified the way Payments-in-Lieu-of Taxes (PILOTS) are treated so that their growth does not negatively impact a municipality's ability to remain under the tax cap. Specifically, this legislation would have provided that the tax base growth factor include increases in the assessed value for those properties that are subject to a PILOT agreement. This is an issue NYCOM's Finance Committee, which I am a member, has worked on for several years. Unfortunately, the Governor has vetoed that legislation. Along with AIM funding, this will continue to be one of our committee's priorities and I hope we will be able to get legislation re-introduced in the near future.

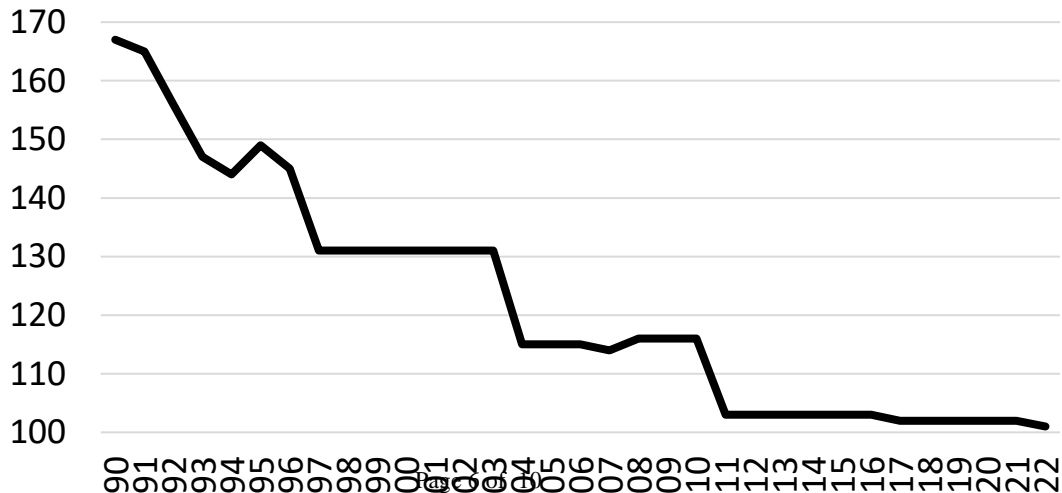
**Human Resources:** Our employees are our most expensive and valuable resource. Some of the most difficult issues we deal with are a result of our reduced staffing levels and lack of centralized human resource management.

**Staffing Levels** – The next couple of slides I have shown you many times, but I believe they need to stay in the forefront of discussions as we work to deliver quality services, make internal organizational improvements, and provide policy support.

POSITIONS	NUMBER OF FULL-TIME
Personnel & Labor Relations Administrator	1
Conf. Secretary to the Planning & Econ. Dev. Director*	1
Engineering Aid	1
Maintenance Worker	2
Automotive Mechanic	1
Laborer	2
Motor Equipment Operator	1
Sign Maintenance Worker	1
Working Supervisor	1
Patrolmen	3
Firefighters	11
Senior Account Clerk/Typist	1
Account Clerk/Typist	1
Buildings & Grounds Supervisor	1
Recreation Leader	1
Senior Center Director	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>30</b>

Since 2003, I have reduced the City’s workforce from 131 to 101 full-time employees, a 22.9% decrease. This greatly limits our ability to provide additional services. However, it should be noted that this reduction in the workforce has helped to stabilize our finances.

Even prior to the change in our form of government in 1995, the City had been losing full-time positions. In FY90, the City had 167 full-time employees, bringing the total decrease to date to 66 employees or a 39.5% reduction.



**Labor Relations Administrator** - Not having a centralized Human Resources (HR) administration is challenging given the size of our organization and the myriad of needs that must be met on a daily basis. These needs are becoming more readily apparent as I have been working with the Fire and Police Departments on organizational management planning. Effective HR management helps to create a positive workplace culture, retain top talent, and support the overall success of the organization.

In FY00, we established the position of Labor Relations Administrator. Unfortunately, the position was eliminated during a round of workforce reductions. The duties of this position are shared among various staff members, which is challenging given the lack of expertise in the subject area and difficulty in maintaining consistent decision making in a decentralized system.

If filled, some of the needed daily support this position would provide are:

- Assisting departments with labor contract administration.
- Assisting with counseling and disciplinary actions.
- Updating administrative policies and procedures.
- Managing grievances.
- Handling Civil Service compliance.
- Assisting with recruitment.
- Scheduling employment physicals.
- Supporting collective bargaining negotiations.
- Conducting pay and benefit analyses.
- Ensuring accurate and consistent payroll and benefits administration.
- Coordinating training for statutory compliance such as harassment training, worker place violence training, and drug and alcohol training for employees holding Commercial Drivers Licenses as a condition of employment.
- Offering training for noncompliance issues such as supervisory training and career development.
- Complying with new and ongoing State mandates such as the Covid requirements during the pandemic and the Health Worker Bonus Program.
- Processing Family with Medical Leave Requests.
- Overseeing the City's Employee Assistance Program (EAP).
- Providing a central location for employees to report harassment or other misconduct.

Adding another position to the payroll is difficult, as we do have some budget challenges ahead of us with rising health insurance, pension payments and other costs that have escalated due to inflation. If we can work through these issues, and there is an opportunity in the budget process to add a new position, this would certainly be worthwhile.

**City Hall Improvements:** City Hall was constructed in 1974 and is in need of regular repairs and improvements to maintain safety and functionality. This past year, we replaced the elevator jack and made repairs to the façade. We are now trying to address issues with leaks in the roof and will be turning our attention to additional water infiltration between the top of the atrium windows and masonry on the building. We are also in need of trying to determine how to best provide an emergency backup generator for the building. We only have a small 12,500 watt portable gasoline generator which has limited power for the phone system, radios, and emergency lights. As City Hall continues to age, we will continue to face more maintenance issues and will need to be prepared to confront these issues with more regularity. I'm hopeful through the Comprehensive Plan process, we will be able to develop a long-term strategy for all of the City's facilities.

**Remediation of Public Properties:** We are continuing to work with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) and Corning Incorporated to address soil contaminants at various locations throughout the city. On City-owned property, further investigation is needed at the Fire Department, our parks, and the rights-of-way. As you know, this is a long arduous process. As these investigations and remediation processes unfold, we will have to find ways to work around these issues, so we don't slow economic development or investment in our community facilities.

**Comprehensive Plan:** The Comprehensive planning process is now underway. Our current plan was adopted in 2002 and is in desperate need of updating. The consultants had their first meeting with the Steering Committee a few weeks ago. This planning process is designed to build consensus to guide development for the next 15-20 years in our neighborhoods and the downtown. The plan will also incorporate smart growth and sustainability principles including: mixed land uses; development and redevelopment; building a strong sense of place; managing density; identifying clean energy and green infrastructure opportunities; and deciding how to adapt to climate change and build resiliency among others. It is being funded largely through a Smart Growth Comprehensive Planning Grant from New York State in the amount of \$80,000.

**Arts Strategy:** The Public Art Committee has developed a city-wide Public Arts Strategy. The consultant held 45 stakeholder conversations, received 455 survey responses, and conducted 3 community visits. This strategy will provide the community and staff with guidance for the future direction public art will take in the city.

**Surveillance System:** As I've mentioned in the past, the City's surveillance system is over twenty-years old and is no longer functioning reliably. The system was developed over the years on a piecemeal basis as a result of concerns that would arise from time-to-time at various locations. Over the past year, we have been evaluating the system on a comprehensive basis with the assistance of Integrated Systems of Victor, New York. This has included evaluating the location of each camera to decide which ones are still needed and what locations that do not currently have coverage would benefit from adding cameras. We have also been evaluating various backhaul technologies to improve the stability and reliability of the system. I hope to complete the analysis by this summer and we are already researching grant sources to be prepared to start implementation later this year.



**WWTP Trickling Filter Cover:** Through Federal funding arranged by former Congressman Tom Reed and an allocation from the City Council, we are preparing to enhance the Waste Water Treatment Plant biological process by adding a dome over the outdoor trickling filter. The total project costs is estimated at \$747,950 with \$450,000 coming from Federal funding. We have completed the design and have awarded the bid to LC Whitford. The project should be commencing within the next month and be completed by the Fall.

**Denison Park Drainage:** As you know we were awarded a \$75,000 grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) to develop a Stormwater and Green Infrastructure Plan for Denison Park. This project will help the City address issues with drainage, stormwater management, and poor pond circulation. Once this study is complete, we will be eligible to apply for the Foundation's implementation grant up to \$500,000 as well as other green infrastructure funds available through the state. This project has also been included in the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) through the Southern Tier Central Regional Planning Board in hopes of increasing our competitiveness for additional grant funding. The planning phase of the project is well underway with a draft of the plan having been received and under review. We anticipate the plan to be completed this spring. It is our hope that the concepts we implement in the park such as permeable pavement and rain gardens can be replicated elsewhere in the community to address stormwater issues in a more environmentally friendly way than traditional infrastructure.

**County Courthouse:** Last year, Steuben County relocated its operations which were housed in the Courthouse on First Street to the Village of Riverside. We worked with Steuben County to clarify ownership of the land on which the building sits, and the County sold the property at auction to Giuseppe and Jennifer Milio. The new owners are working with Johnson-Schmidt & Associates Architects on its redevelopment. We have been in contact with the architects and will be providing assistance as they identify an adaptive reuse which is compatible with the neighborhood.

**Expansion of Prevailing Wage:** In August, New York State enacted the "Roadway Excavation Quality Assurance Act," which mandates the payment of prevailing wages for construction work that requires a permit to open a street and prohibits the issuance of permits without confirmation of the payment of prevailing wages. We are still awaiting guidance from the State on the process we will need to use to make these verifications. This will place an additional burden on City staff and may increase the cost of repairs for property owners hiring contractors to do utility work.

**Police and Fire – Records Management Software:** The records management systems in both the Police and Fire Departments are outdated. The Fire Department uses software from 2017 which is reaching its end of life and will no longer be supported. In addition, the Police Department's software is approximately 24 years old. We are currently working with Steuben County to try to identify vendors that can be used on a county-wide basis to help control costs and provide better data sharing. Last month, Chief Spaulding, Chief Davies and I saw a demonstration of the records management software that is provided by Tyler Technologies which was promising. Tyler is the current vendor for our computerized accounting system as well as the new 911 CAD system Steuben County is installing.

**Administrative Policy Tracking Software:** The City of Corning does not have software to track its operational policies, which hampers our ability to increase efficiency and accountability. We are in the process of procuring software which will store all of policies for easy reference and include accountability procedures to ensure policies have been read and acknowledged. Once we implement the software and upload our current administrative policies and procedures will begin the long process of updating them to meet current standards and conditions.

**ARC Grant – Civic Center Plaza:** The City was notified in the Fall of 2023 that we received a \$30,000 grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) to complete a master plan and preliminary designs for an art park at Civic Center Plaza. This was an idea that was included in the City's Parks Strategy. Now that we are under contract for these funds, we will be releasing a Request for Proposals to hire a consultant to develop a preliminary design working with the Public Art Committee, adjacent property owners, and the community.

**CDL Training:** In 2022, new Commercial Drivers License training standards were mandated by the Federal Government. These standards require entry-level drivers to successfully complete a prescribed program of theory and behind-the-wheel instruction before taking the CDL skills test. Since its implementation, we have been trying to find a way to provide the required training at a reasonable cost. In order to avoid costly fees to private driving schools to obtain this training, I've been working with County Manager Jack Wheeler to allow municipalities to have their drivers trained by the County's Public Works Department. The County has a supervisor with the appropriate instructor's certification. We are still working out cost details, but it is anticipated to be much less expensive than private schooling.

**St. Vincent's Church:** We are continuing to work with Housing Visions to redevelop the St. Vincent's Church properties into affordable housing and daycare. This past year, we assisted the developer with securing \$2 million of Retore NY funds. Ther developer still has pending applications for further State funding which should be announced in the coming months. Once the project is fully funded, the City staff will be working with them on the building permit process.

## **CONCLUSION**

Although this isn't an exhaustive list of our accomplishments for 2023 and our upcoming challenges and opportunities, I hope that it provides insight into some of our priority items. As you can see, we've accomplished a lot in the past year and have several challenges and opportunities ahead of us. This has been and continues to be an extremely heavy workload for such a small staff. Trying to keep up with these items, along with the many daily issues that arise and routine work that must still be performed can be overwhelming for staff at times. It is my hope that by working together and maintaining a positive attitude, we will complete all of these things and more despite our limited resources.

I would like to thank the City Council and staff for your continued support as we address the City's most pressing issues. I look forward to continuing to work with all of you to provide high quality services at a reasonable cost and plan for development that is compatible with our community's character.