



2024 State of the City
North Tonawanda

Mayor Austin J. Tylec

February 6, 2024

2024 STATE OF THE CITY OF NORTH TONAWANDA

It's Important to recognize February as the Start of Black History Month. A month where the nation recognizes the profound impact of Black history on the very foundation of our community. It is a time to honor the achievements, resilience, and cultural richness that have shaped us into the diverse and vibrant Nation we are today.

Black History Month is an opportunity for us to deepen our understanding of the challenges faced and the triumphs achieved by the African American community. It's a chance for our community to come together and celebrate diversity. In the spirit of unity and progress, let this month serve as an opportunity for meaningful conversations, education, and action. Together, as one community, we can create a city where every individual feels seen, heard, and valued.

To our Residents, Elected Officials, City Employees, and others, it is an honor and privilege to be before you as Mayor of our incredible City. North Tonawanda, a city with a rich history and bright future, has always been defined by the commitment and unity of our people. Over the past year, our city navigated challenges, found new opportunities for growth, and elevated our profile as a prominent destination in Western New York.

We improved communication & collaboration between city departments, implemented new city-wide initiatives and internal policies, stabilized our city finances and improved our reserve funds, identified new avenues for economic growth with over \$25m in grants for public & private development, and as always put the needs of our community first. All of which would not be possible without the dedication of our Department Heads, hundreds of city employees, elected officials, and many others that collectively shape North Tonawanda.

Our City has experienced some of the most challenging economic environments in recent history, coupled with past deficient financial practices that were substantiated by the NYS Comptroller's Office and the City's independent Auditors. Under my Administration, our financial stability is and will always be a priority so we can continue our economic growth. When I took office, I was challenged with a dwindled \$300,000 reserve fund, an annual operating deficit of over \$1m, a

declining Moody's rating (Credit Score for Bonding), inaccurate budgetary figures, climbing expenses, and borrowing millions of dollars in short-term Tax Anticipation Notes.

With the efforts of City Accountant Jeff Zellner and every Departments working tirelessly with my office since day 1, we altered our course. Over the past two years, and leading into 2024's \$43.5m budget; we now have a projected reserve of \$1.5m, we balanced our operating budget with honest figures, stabilized our Moody's rating which was about to lower even more, reduced our expenses by \$1m without slashing services, created an additional \$1m in revenues through new initiatives, reduced our NYS Comptrollers fiscal stress designation from Moderate Financial Stress to No Designation, have seen a 5%-10% increase each year in revenue with sales tax, and for the first time in years we may not need to borrow short term notes in order to pay our monthly bills. We still have more to do, but this is an incredible accomplishment in a short period of time.

Our financial stability is important because it ultimately affects our City Departments and their ability to provide daily services to our residents and businesses.

In 2023, under the leadership of Superintendent Mark Zellner, our Department of Public Works successfully paved 23 miles of roads, removed 250 undesirable trees and 375 stumps, hauled over 15,000 tons of garbage and 1900 tons of recyclables, repurposed 16,000 cubic yards of organic waste into free woodchips for residents, and with new methods repaired over 12,400sf of sidewalks. In 2024, the department plans to maintain road paving and do self-hauling of our bulk debris to save us nearly \$100,000. They will continue to crack-down on bulk pick-up code violations, which has helped enhance neighborhoods and substantially reduce our expenses, and by us allocating more funding for sidewalks repairs than years prior, we will be able to double sidewalk repairs so residents can safely walk our neighborhoods. The department continues to update intersection lights, efficiently clear our roads during major snow storms, assist with the growing number of events, and even help with seasonal decorations in our downtown area. Our DPW will continue to go above and beyond what's expected, find innovative ways to save money,

all while maintaining our 11 square mile city. My office and the members of our community are thankful for everything **Mark Zellner** and his employees do.

Under the leadership of Director Alex Domaradzki, our Parks & Recreation Department saw consistent use of our parks, boat docks, ballfields, golf course, park shelters, and many other public amenities. In 2023, the department served over 4,000 individuals through our Youth Center, Senior Center, and Recreational Programs. The department maintained partnerships with a wide variety of organizations in our City. Including volunteer planting events with the NT Botanical Garden, utilizing the Lumber City Church location for our Youth & Recreation Programs, and with us having to close memorial pool due to cost & safety concerns, we created a partnership with the NT School District to continue swim lessons at their indoor facility. While partnerships continued, so do a vast array of improvements and projects. With new development and improvements at our Gateway Harbor, we saw an influx in boaters this past year. We began a public wifi project at Gateway Park that is near completion and will be installing new tables, bike racks and a complete update of the built-in seating along the dock walkway. With a \$30,000 NYS Canal Corp Grant, we will be installing a new Kayak Dock and Fishing Pier at Mayors Park, which will create another connection point along our canal. Through the results of our Forest Management Plan and our online tracking database, we must increase the number of trees and their diversity throughout the city to avoid the destruction of invasive species like the Emerald Ash Borer. As such, we were successful in planting 63 new trees throughout our community, and have plans to increase this number for 2024. One of the most notable projects in the Parks Department is our plans for a new aquatic facility at Payne Park. With our steering committee, engineering consultants, and public engagement; we have developed a design concept that includes a new concession & locker building, lap pool, slide features, splash area, and many other accessible features for all types of users. As this \$7m project moves forward, we were successful in acquiring a \$750,000 grant through NYS Parks, but we wont be stopping there. We cannot put this price tag onto our tax payers, so we are currently working on another grant application along with sponsorship marketing packages for large donor contributions. We know our community

wants a public aquatic facility, and we will do everything possible to start construction in the Spring of 2025.

At Deerwood Golf Course we saw an increase of rounds played with over 58,000 sessions, 1,000 memberships, and approximately \$1.3m in revenue. Through assigned capital funds we made many improvements including Pump Station upgrades for our irrigation system, numerous bunkers were addressed, maintenance of our ponds, and overall enhancements throughout our greens. For anyone that has golfed this past season, I think we can all agree the course has never looked better, thanks to Matt Boroweic and his team. In addition, if you haven't been to the new concessionaire 1818 Bar & Grill, I ask you all to stop by as they will continue to provide fantastic food and accommodations throughout the seasons.

Our Senior Center saw an increase in participants with expanded programs and events for everyone to enjoy thanks to Pam Hogan and her staff. Coming soon will be the creation of a computer lab, facility improvements, and additional programs with a \$20,000 grant through the NYS Office of Aging. As many of us know, you don't have to be a senior to enjoy the events, laughs, and great people at our Senior Center.

We are also working on plans to consolidate our recreation offices, youth programs, senior center, and Community Development department under one roof as a centralized location for all these services. These efforts will not only bring all these departments together, but we see it as a cost savings measure to reduce separate utilities, rents, and many other expenses.

The Parks & Recreation Department will continue to offer all programs and services our community enjoys, and they will always play an active part in providing friendly, enjoyable, and satisfying recreational experiences for all. Thank you to **Alex Domaradzki** and his entire staff for all their dedication and hard work.

The City Market, under the leadership of Market Manager Chris DelPrince, was voted The Number 1 Market in the Nation this past year. An incredible accomplishment thanks to various market enhancements to the site & building, ongoing events coordinated by Mr. DelPrince,

continued commitment from farmers & vendors, widespread support from community members, and extensive visibility in the media through Marketing Specialist Joe Ciffa. Our new Hometown Heroes wall continues to grow and honor those who have served. In addition to this, enhancements wouldn't be possible without dedicated donors like David Chevrolet, the manpower of our Department of Public works, Parks & Rec, and many others who have made us Number 1. With all this and more, sales for our vendors and farmers were up 25% or more from previous years. Truly remarkable and evident of how far our Market has come in such a short period of time. Thank you to **Chris DelPrince**, our vendors, Clerk Treasurer, and our community members for making our Market an anchor in Western NY.

One department that continues to be the nucleus of our City is the Clerk-Treasurer's Office. They interact with every department, manage our Common Council agendas, organize our City Committees, communicate and interact with thousands of our residents, process bills, issue licenses, and much more to keep City Hall functioning. For 2024, the department will be assisting with our new automated water meter program and finding new ways to get information out to the public. Thank you to Clerk-Treasurer **Donna Braun** and your entire department for keeping us moving forward.

The Assessor's Office & Building Department processed a landmark amount of residential and commercial property improvements totaling over \$41m, and 250 property sales. With 2,350 building permits and over 900 licensed contractors in the city, this was by far one of the busiest years in development for these departments. We saw the opening of new businesses and a projected increase in new housing developments totaling an additional 300 residential living units throughout the city. Which would double Governor Hochul's push for communities to increase their housing units by 1%. In addition, our city Assessor asked me to note that although we are not moving forward with a city-wide reassessment; The Town of Lockport, Town of Cambria, and City of Lockport recently completed a reassessment to 100% market value, which helped lower our county tax rate by \$.35 per \$1000, ultimately reducing our county tax bill.

The economic health of any community can be indicated by the level of development, and it's evident that North Tonawanda is growing and healthy, with more on the way for 2024. Thank you to **Rob DePaolo, Barbara Klenke**, and all your staff for furthering growth in our city and continuing to stimulate our tax base.

Following the millions of dollars in private developments, our Engineering Department also had a busy year overseeing public & private projects throughout the city. Notable projects within the department include; completing our Tonawanda Island infrastructure study to understand future development needs, reviewing the Sweeney Street subdivision which will create over 60 new homes, design of a \$1.4m Zimmerman Waterline Replacement project with construction starting this year to improve water pressure, a \$1m city-wide water/wastewater infrastructure study to help plan for much needed capital improvements to our infrastructure, implementing a GIS System to map all city infrastructure, preliminary work for realigning the Meadow/Payne intersection to improve vehicular & pedestrian safety, and working on an 18-month Engineering Study of our Twin City Memorial Highway with a \$500,000 grant from Congressman Higgins that will eventually lead to a \$30m reconstruction of this highway which has divided our city for decades. With various delays outside of our hands, this year we will finally be moving on construction of the \$2m Sweeney Street Bike Path to connect Mayor's Park with the Botanical Gardens, begin updating our Local Waterfront Revitalization Plan and Comprehensive Plan with the assistance of an extensive steering committee, and begin the design of Streetscape & Walkability improvements for the Oliver Street Corridor and Downtown Area with a \$2.5m grant through Governor Hochul's Downtown Revitalization Initiative. Thank you to **Chelsea Spahr, Travis Sikora**, and their staff for managing millions of dollars in improvements throughout our city, and sharing the perspective that infrastructure is a priority in this administration.

North Tonawanda prides ourselves on having a safe community thanks to our Police Department. In 2023, the department processed over 51,000 calls for service which focused on addressing

numerous traffic related violations. Due to this extra attention, accidents went down 32% from years prior. This included STOP DWI Patrols which resulted in 125 DWI related arrests.

With \$450,000 in various grant awards, the department will be refurbishing the pistol range and obtaining new equipment for the department, including new radar units and a voice stress analyzer for the detective bureau which will be an asset when interviewing suspects and new department hires.

While keeping up with New York State's police reform laws, officers participated in several different training classes above and beyond the required yearly training. These classes brought awareness to hate crimes, racial profiling, freedom of speech, elder abuse, and domestic violence. The new matron program to reduce overtime costs with our Officers saved us over \$100,000, while allowing constant supervision over prisoners. The new Bus Patrol program in collaboration with our School District created an additional \$50,000 in revenue to the city, while providing our school district with updated bus cameras at no cost. Collaboration with the School District also led to expanding our School Resource Officer Program (SRO) by providing four officers throughout the district. Throughout this contract negotiation we were able to secure a 40% increase in reimbursements per officer (\$125,000/Officer) to keep schools safe and provide the necessary funds for us to back-fill those open positions. I've been told this program has been tremendously well received and has fostered positive relationships between our Police, Students, and Faculty. The department also made public outreach a priority by participating in programs such as the NT Senior Class Picnic at Gratwick Hose, youth basketball tournaments at Payne Park, Child Safety Seat Checks, several Trunk or Treats, Shop with a Cop, and Boxes of Hope.

Lastly, at the beginning of 2023 my office created a City Hall Safety & Security Committee which comprised of members from the police, fire, building, and Engineering Departments; tasked with reviewing the security & safety of employees and residents occupying City Hall. After many months of review, we have successfully updated exterior/interior cameras, created a safe exchange zone at City Hall for online purchases, implemented employee fob access, designed safety protocols which will be taught annually, and will be rerouting public access through the

NYS Courts security scanners this year. The safety & security of our City is a priority, but it also needs to be a priority for our public buildings and those within them. I would like to commend **Police Chief Keith Glass** for your proactive leadership and thank the entire Police Department for everything you do. I am confident our law enforcement will continue to keep our city one of the safest in New York State.

Parallel to public safety is our Fire Department which responded to 3700 incidents in 2023. They saw \$400,000 in fire loss damages from 2023, which was a decrease of \$700,000 from 2022, and fortunately no fire related lives were lost this past year. The Department conducted fire safety inspections at local businesses, day cares, and mobile food vendors that operate at various events. As we begin to bring back more firework displays with Canal Fest, the New Years Ball Drop, and our plans for The 4th of July; the department plays a critical role in the complicated permits and safety measures that must take place.

The Training Office oversaw comprehensive training programs for both career and volunteer firefighters within the NTFD, collectively devoting over 3900 man-hours to training initiatives. Nine members underwent specialized training for Firefighter Assist and Search Team operations, equipping them with the necessary skills to rescue trapped firefighters. The team also received training in crucial areas such as fire alarm & sprinkler systems, responding to natural gas incidents, and handling carbon monoxide emergencies—essential knowledge in today's fire service landscape. Additionally, two members achieved certification as Incident Safety Officers, ensuring the safety of all Fire Department members during emergency scenes. The department continues to be an asset to our City. They don't just keep us safe from fires, natural disasters, water related rescues, or when we need medical attention, they also collaborate with our Police Department, Volunteer Firefighters, and Police Auxiliary whenever we need them in action. Thank you to **Fire Chief Joe Sikora** and our entire fire department for stepping up when emergencies come our way.

Under the Direction of Superintendent Jason Koepsell; our Water & Wastewater Department, along with Water Distribution moved forward on various projects to keep things flowing.

Our Water Department completed the Phase 1 Emergency Generator Project at our Water Treatment Plant to ensure we have back-ups during power outages, and now began design of Phase 2 with electrical upgrades. The Department passed all DOH inspections and helped save us an expense by rebuilding our low service pump with internal maintenance staff. For 2024, we will be starting construction of the Water Capital Improvement Project, and will begin the process of inspecting our Erie Water Tower & Tollner Tank, along with our Clear Well & Intake.

This past year, Water Distribution handled approximately 48 water main breaks, replaced 16 fire hydrants, completed flushing of our water distribution system, and started the Federally mandated Lead & Copper Rules and Regulation Inventory review. With our ongoing Automatic Meter Program, the department will continue their efforts converting residential and commercial meters for the next several years. These new meters will no longer require people to send in meter cards, instead the city will be able to collect readings through cellular signal, which will save time and money for us all. We will finally be catching up with neighboring municipalities and how they keep track of water usage.

In our Wastewater Treatment plant we successfully completed the \$6m Capital Improvement Project to our 4 low head & 4 high head pumps, energy efficiency upgrades, and rehabbing our grit systems. The Department also rebuilt a raw sewage pump and upgraded new drives for additional energy efficiency. Coupled with energy improvements, a National Grid Energy Efficiency rebate is near completion for these projects based on the significant reduction in energy use.

With the assistance of Assemblyman Conrad securing \$5m and an additional \$4.7m secured through a NYS WIIA Grant, we have been able to move forward with much needed improvements on our Carbon Pipes and Anerobic Digester. Construction on the Carbon Pipes is projected to begin this summer, and the Digester Project is currently out for engineering design services. These are two essential features of our plant that prevent wastewater from backing up into basements and stop raw sewage from discharging into the Niagara River. Although these

infrastructure related projects take a lot of time and money, they are critical for providing day-to-day services, and we are in a much better place with more plans to come. Thank you to **Superintendent Jason Koepsell** and your entire staff for everything they do.

While we continue to improve various aspects of our city services, we must also be working to bring in new development, support and expand businesses, while enhancing neighborhoods to increase our tax base. This past year we saw many new brick & mortar businesses created, including Sweet Em's Bakery, Hana Mushrooms, The Burning Candle Emporium expansion, Aster & Lilies boutique, 1818 Bar & Grill, Martinsville Soap Works expansion into the Wurlitzer Building, You Grow Girl plant store, FIGMOR restaurant, Avalon Exotics expansion to Webster Street, Skin Lab 716, and The Links, Golf & Tap to name a few.

Through collaboration with Lumber City Development, Community Development Director **Laura Wilson**, and our new grant writing/engineering firm; we've seen an incredible influx of State Funding and economic growth in 2023, with more plans for this year. Many of the projects and grants mentioned have transpired from Mrs. Wilson's coordinated efforts between LCDC, City Officials, City departments, Local Businesses, and New York State agencies. In total, North Tonawanda has been the recipient of more than \$25m in grants over the last 2.5 years for various private, public, and non-profit projects.

A significant portion of our grant funds are attributed by the Downtown Revitalization Initiative (Known as the "DRI") in which The City was awarded \$10m through the DRI from Governor Kathy Hochul's Office and administered by the NYS Department of State, Empire State Development and the Office of Homes and Community Renewal. This initiative is focused on boosting local economies by transforming communities into vibrant neighborhoods where the next generation of New Yorkers will want to live, work, and raise a family.

Through our Local Planning Committee and its strategic vision to support a mix of residential & commercial density, enhance business districts, create recreational public amenities, and capitalize on our geographical features; I'm happy to provide updates on the following DRI projects and other developments underway:

- The historic Railroad Museum on Oliver Street completed their site improvements and provides a connection point between our downtown and Oliver Street Corridor
- 211 Main Street's construction has been moving steadily, completing their site work, near completion of exterior finishes, and underway with interior work to house Class A Office Space, which is envisioned as a business-to-business design hub, and projected to open this Spring.
- Across the street at 190 Main St, Alpine Construction has been processing initial site plans through the Planning Board on a multi-million dollar development with 70 apartments, street level commercial space, and 160+ parking spaces with new landscaping. A catalyst project for the entrance to our downtown area and further meeting our vision to connect the existing downtown to our Niagara River Waterfront and Tonawanda Island
- The Dockside expansion at 27 Main Street completed their roof replacement, and is working through design to begin façade updates, new storefronts, and commercial kitchen with projected completion at the end of this year.
- The 10 Goundry Street apartment complex has completed their survey, with plans to begin demolition by this summer.
- 122 Webster St has designs underway and will be a multi-million dollar infill project with mixed-use residential/commercial space
- The Carousel Museum has completed their designs for a Music Room Expansion and has been working on closing a \$150k funding gap to begin construction
- 230 Oliver Street Structural work is underway, with electrical and mechanical contractors ready to start their work. Project completion is anticipated for this Summer and will become a mixed-use property with commercial/residential spaces
- Neighboring this project is 235 Oliver St which has completed designs to update their façade and create 8 apartments, with completion of construction projected this summer.
- 624 River Road has been steadily moving on their additional 100-unit luxury apartment buildings located along the waterfront, with a projected completion this Fall.
- A \$450,000 Commercial Property Improvement Program, managed by Lumber City Development, awarded 11 commercial properties throughout the Downtown and Oliver

Street Area. These 11 projects are all underway with funds provided to assist in façade enhancements, utility upgrades roof repairs, ADA improvements, and more to enhance businesses. All of these projects are intended to begin construction this year.

- On the City side, we will be utilizing \$2.5m in DRI funds to improve walkability and streetscape enhancements along the Oliver Street Corridor and Downtown Area. We will be publishing an RFP for engineering services in the upcoming weeks and are working to create a stakeholder/steering committee.
- We are also excited to see Riviera Theatres multi-million dollar expansion. The theatre has continued to be an economic anchor for our downtown businesses and cultural standing in Western NY

These projects are just a few of many other developments that show businesses, developers, and Residents, want to live, work, and invest in North Tonawanda. “And” as Mayor I can say we as a city do everything we can to push for progress. However, with all our progress & successful endeavors, some things don’t always happen as quickly as we’d like. We face challenges and find new avenues.

The \$45m housing project at the former Lowry School was supposed to begin last year after the City assisted in a \$1.5m Restore NY grant, but due to contractor issues, construction increases, and difficulties with the transaction, they need to revisit their proforma. And we will be assisting any way we can to get a project completed.

Last year we brought in the first Fiber Internet Network with Greenlight Networks. They planned to have service started for an area of the city in the fall of 2023, but found they needed a new host location for their server which the City will be providing. Greenlight recently informed me approximately 1000 households should have access this March, with many more shortly after.

We worked for three years on a Community Choice Aggregate program to provide residents with cheaper electricity options, but with energy markets extremely volatile, this program has been put on hold. However we found alternatives and this year we will be introducing a new opt-in energy program for all residents to have an opportunity with a 10% reduction in your energy costs.

During this Administration, We significantly improved our city finances and updated various internal policies, we leveraged a historic amount of grant funds that help businesses grow and supports new developments, we're prioritizing infrastructure improvements by applying the necessary funds and attention that has been needed for a long time. While we continue moving these items forward, we now need to focus more on improving our neighborhoods, addressing the challenges of absentee landlords and neglected properties.

Our neighborhoods are the heartbeat of this City. They define who we are as a community, and it is critical that we invest our time, resources, and knowledge into enhancing the quality of life for all residents.

This past year, we began more initiatives to help neighborhoods. We received a Niagara County Grant to help with rodent remediation, worked with grass roots organizations on beautification projects, found permanent housing for 15 homeless people through the creation of the Tonawanda's Twin Cities Homeless Task Force, enhanced walkability by increasing funding for sidewalk improvements, introduced a city-supported residential plumbing insurance program to assist those in emergencies, and stepped-up code enforcement with our Building Department and DPW to address blite. Now we need to do more.

Well-maintained properties not only contribute to the aesthetic appeal of our streets but also boost property values, fostering economic growth. As we focus on improving single & multi-family residential properties, we are not just enhancing the physical appearance but also elevating the overall standard of living for everyone who calls North Tonawanda home. This year, we will undertake initiatives that contribute to these efforts by:

1. Pursuing various NYS funded homeowner repair grant programs to assist property owners with exterior, ADA, and weatherization improvements.
2. Utilizing our Bronze Certified Climate Smart Task Force to educate the public on NYS incentivized programs and rebates for property updates associated with energy upgrades.
3. Working on ways to increase our tree inventory & diversity.

4. *And with over 1400 multi-family properties in the City, our biggest item needs to be* Updating our Rental Property Regulations. We will be looking to mirror other WNY Municipalities ordinances; requiring registration of rental units for our City database and code enforcement, require landlords or management companies to have a contact within Niagara County or a neighboring County, not absentee landlords located in other countries, and among many other provisions we will ensure the properties are up to code and maintained for the safety & well-being of every tenant.

This will take time but it is necessary for our aging neighborhoods. It's time to address ongoing concerns head-on and implement measures that hold absentee landlords accountable for the condition of their properties, provide residents the tools & information necessary to improve their homes, and facilitate various initiatives that invest in our neighborhoods. Together, we can work towards making neighborhoods more vibrant, welcoming, and a place that we are all proud to call home.

Over the last year North Tonawanda has prospered thanks to our City Departments, Local Businesses, Common Council, Clerk Treasurer, City Attorney, Community Members, and the support of New York State. It is an honor to serve as your Mayor, and in 2024 I will continue to work tirelessly to improve our finances, increase services and safety, support our business growth, enhance our neighborhoods, and take on challenges with an optimistic approach. North Tonawanda is a recognized destination in Western NY, and I am proud of how far we've come. Thank you again to everyone and for your commitment to our city. There is an immense amount of potential in our community, and I am truly honored to serve the wonderful citizens of North Tonawanda.

Austin J. Tylec

**Honorable Austin J. Tylec
Mayor, City of North Tonawanda**