



2021 State of the City Of North Tonawanda

Delivered by Mayor Arthur G. Pappas

February 16, 2021

Fellow Citizens, Common Council members, The Press and Guests, it is an honor to report the State of our City in 2021. It has been an unprecedented past year with all the restrictions for the COVID-19 virus, however our City remains vigilant and is progressing under this siege. Our employees in every department have stepped up to make sure the City remains on track and thriving as best possible under some stressful conditions. Projects were completed and services remained intact so North Tonawanda is moving forward regardless of the pandemic at hand.

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Unfortunately, we did see the closure of some businesses due to the virus, but we also have some new enterprises under way with the opening of several barber shops and hair salons, Mana Bar, Black Heart Café, Erie Avenue Lumber City Winery and Bistro. Mayor's Pizza and notably coming Spot Coffee and a new family oriented casual Mexican restaurant as well as a wood fired pizzeria, Pizza Amore, where the old Little Caesars stood will enhance business in town. 110 Sweeney Street is still considering opening a restaurant in the canal area downtown. Aunt Eno's sandwich shop will open on Oliver Street this spring. The Vegan Grocery Store with a customer base reaching to Canada, outgrew its location and moved to 342 Oliver Street expanding allergen-free options. Business owners have had the support of local residents who have carried them through the tough times, and they are very appreciative. The Downtown Placemaking construction has been completed with bump outs, new lighting and signage, and the expansion of Charles Fleischman Park. A clock tower component is planned to be completed this year with funding from Niagara Greenway. The reconstruction of Main Street took place with green infrastructure, sidewalks, street trees and lighting. Pedestrian safety improvements have been added with signals, crosswalks and ADA ramps at four intersections in town. Reestablishment of the shoreline along Tonawanda Creek transforming the shoreline to a more natural form supporting a higher functioning ecosystem and green infrastructure improvements along Main street have been made. Projects for this coming year to be completed are the connection of the existing bike path to the Empire State Trail, Niagara Riverwalk improvements, and the extension of the bike path from Mayor's park to the Botanical Gardens. Installation of a new picnic shelter at Gratwick Riverside Park and ADA improvements at Pine Woods park will enhance both areas for citizens use.

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The common Council unanimously selected the Pennrose LLC's Timber Shore design for construction at 78 Bridge Street, the former city owned fire training site. The project is a 3 story, 72,000 square foot residential concept with complimentary retail, community, and public amenities. This will aide in developing critical density on Tonawanda Island and provide significant public access to the waterfront of the Little River. Once started the project should be completed in 24 months.

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The Building Inspector's office reports that 8 new dwellings have been constructed and the Grant Street 52-unit apartment building is now complete and occupied. A fiber optic facility on Erie Ave. is complete and the conversion of the former school on Wheatfield Street with 37 apartments is under way for completion in May. On Payne Ave. a new office/storage building is under construction and the remodeling of the YWCA will house 12 apartments for battered women including a café both being completed this spring. Several new endeavors are under way for this year with a multi-million-dollar conversion of the Lowry School on Payne Avenue to 87 apartments. Niagara Falls Blvd. will see a new secure storage facility, and on Tonawanda Island a building for manufacturing expansion is presently being reviewed by the Planning Board. Construction of 16 four-unit residential buildings on Sweeney Street, three residential buildings consisting of 18 apartments on Zimmerman Street, and on Main Street a proposed restaurant with small retail shop and 15 residential units are expected to begin. There was a total of \$24.5 million in work done in 2020 despite the pandemic.

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The Niagara Community Action Program has been inundated with requests for assistance this year. Temporary relief was brought to low income struggling families during the pandemic. Ten homes received weatherization work, four homes received emergency repair, 836 households received food, 194 received clothing, 13 received budget counseling and 4 households received back mortgage/rent payments. All assistance was within the City of NT from this agency with a neighborhood center located on Thompson Street. NIACAP has become a valuable resource for those NT residents needing assistance during these difficult times.

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The drive-up mailboxes at the Keller Building (DMV) and on Columbia Drive (the brick road) help eliminate congestion at the Post Office. With the Mayor working closely with the Postmaster the boxes were installed by the Postal Service allowing residents to mail directly from their car especially in inclement weather, making a safer situation for mailing. According to the City Assessor's office which performs many duties such as adjusting exemptions yearly and making sure the information key punched into the NYS reality system is correct, homes in our city continue to sell and our newly formed City budget kept the tax increase at a low rate. In the ranking of the Best Cities to live in NYS, NT ranked number 21 which examines housing, employment, education, health and quality of life.

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In comparing our community with others in NYS with a population of 30,000 or more we are number 16 in the safest cities in NYS. This includes NYC and those much larger. Law enforcement per 1,000 people is 1.71 officers and we have been designated one of the overall safest Cities in NYS.

To better serve the residents of NT, the police dept. enacted an Aggressive Driver program to reduce violation of vehicle and traffic laws. The dog control officer has been reassigned to the Police dept. and a new therapy dog program began for victims of trauma events, reducing child disclosures 50% when the dog is at hand. The dog will be used for investigations regarding mental health and domestic calls. The dog will be at events to encourage positive contacts between the community and police. The most aggressive policy per the Governor's orders was to establish a Police Reform Policy which has been completed by a committee comprised of citizens, law enforcement, Council representation, and the Mayor. A survey was conducted for public input and the Police Reform and Reinvention Collaborative is now being reviewed by the Council before it is submitted to the State for approval.

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During these trying times, the Fire Dept. has had to adapt to many new procedures in an effort to keep residents as well as firefighters safe. The low number of COVID-19 positive cases the dept. has experienced shows the diligence of the firefighters' work. The department helps provide mutual aid to surrounding communities with members on the Haz Mat and Technical Rescue Team and newly Sheriff's Dept. Underwater Rescue Team membership. Response was made to 3,258 incidents resulting in a fire loss of \$637,908, however not all those were in NT. The Cities Fire Police responded to 156 incidents which support the NTFD and the NTPD. With the Fire Police and Volunteer Fighters' dedication their assistance was invaluable during these trying times. By the hard work of Robert Orłowski, we received \$461,595 in grant money resulting in upgrades to aging apparatus and equipment. A 2020 Ford Transit Fire Investigation vehicle which replaced a 1989 vehicle makes it the first new investigation vehicle in Dept. history. A 2000 pumper was replaced by a 2020 Rosenbauer pumper and aging hose and nozzles were replaced with state-of-the-art new light weight equipment. New much needed PPE was purchased during the ongoing pandemic. Two assistant chiefs retired promoting two captains to the vacated positions and then two firefighters ascended to Captains as two new firefighters entered the dept.

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Our Department of Public Works has been striving to maintain services despite the virus and the toll it took on workers. Trash pick up continued as well as bulk pick up. However, a new flyer by the Dept. outlines new restrictions forth coming. The Department's goal is to keep the City beautiful and clean so new restrictions are necessary to work toward that goal. Residents abiding by the new rules will greatly enhance the City's sanitation goal. The DPW this year paved approximately 14 miles of road in an attempt to maintain serviceable roads. 150 trees have been removed as well as numerous trims have been made to trees Citywide. Approximately 500 blocks of sidewalk have been replaced making our pedestrian walkways safer. Also storm sewers were inspected, maintained and repaired. The DPW crews have worked tirelessly to keep NT a City of which to be proud.

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The City Water Works currently has seen a change in supervision with the retirement of Bill Davignon and replacement by Jason Koepsell. Under Bill's direction the annual quality inspection showed that NT had no violations, and our plant is operating well. A new standby generator and electrical equipment has been 50% completed with \$1.8 million coming from grant funds. An old Diesel fuel tank has been removed from underground and is replaced with a new above ground tank making it safer for the environment. The annual DEC inspection and report shows our wastewater treatment plant to be in compliance with all SPDES requirements. A 2nd new Sludge pump will replace a 1980 pump that will operate more efficiently. A new Grid removal system will improve solids removal to 80% and save us money on chemical treatments, sludge removal and Digester cleanings. All lighting has been replaced with LED lights saving energy, and the chlorine upgrades from a pressurized to a vacuum system will make it safer protecting from a chlorine leak. Future endeavors include repairs to the Toellner Water storage tank and implementation of Capital improvements to bring the facility up to date. This will aide us in providing high quality drinking water to residents. This will be accomplished by improving the water intake pipes, low level service pumps and finished water flow metering system as well as improvements and repairs to the low service water tank and setting basins. Structural repairs will be made to Filter building and backwash drainpipe and all electrical upgrades to the service pumps, heating, air conditioning, lighting, windows, and doors. Four high head pumps and four low head pumps will be installed upgrades to the sewage pump and sludge motor control center. So, you can see Jason Koepsell has a lot of responsibility to handle going forward in his new position.

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The NT Dept of Youth, Recreation, Parks and Seniors saw a tremendous reduction in programming due to the pandemic. Many events were cancelled due to restrictions imposed. The Dept. attempted to provide new and virtual programming to meet the needs of the community. The staff did a great job keeping things updated technologically and completed in a timely manner. The Youth Center was closed but a variety of activities were planned to replace those at the center. Softball and flag football leagues were conducted as well as pick up hockey, virtual cooking classes and craft club. Summer saw the dispersement of 3,500 lunches at Payne Park and we conducted a virtual Easter live event, a Halloween Havoc Drive through at Pinewoods Park which resulted in collecting 1,500 non-perishable items and \$187 for the Little Food pantries located in NT. For our Seniors, exercise classes were conducted virtually, and Adult softball leagues were held with protocols in place. Essential programs for Seniors were held such as nutrition, legal and Heap services with restrictions. The grocery shopping program continued and transportation for those in need. Socially distant programs were instituted with an arts and crafts drop off program and cooking classes virtually to keep Seniors engaged. The creation of a Senior Center Facebook page was implemented to provide resource updates and posts with exercise from home videos.

In lieu of the traditional Veteran's Day breakfast a delivered meal was made to Veterans along with a bag full of items donated by local businesses. The golf course saw 54,278 rounds of golf played making it the highest since 2016. The staff worked hard to ensure the course was operating safely under required COVID-19 restrictions. A New Turf Management Schedule greatly improved our greens and repairs to several bunkers along with addressing irrigation issues making improvements to areas. A survey taken showed the public noticed the improvements and we are moving in the right direction to provide a genuine quality golf experience. Our parks showed an increase in usage due to people wanting to be outdoors during the pandemic. Several fields were improved, signage installed at Pinewoods Park and the walking trails. Cedar fencing was installed at Mayor's Park and 89 trees were planted as part of the street and park initiative. In 2021 we hope to see additional pavilions and a portable restroom at Gratwick Park and the resurfacing of the Taber tennis courts. A complete bathroom remodel will take place at Pinewoods Park and additional signage and parking for Raymond Klimek Veteran's Park along with restoration of the main inlet at the park spearheaded by the Buffalo Niagara Waterkeeper organization.

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The Botanical Gardens has been hard at work to revitalize the area along the canal. The non for profit NTBGO has monumental plans for the entire area. The goal is to make the site an educational hub for exploring ecological links, piloting green infrastructure practices, and for modeling sustainable gardening. The Sustainable Community Program was awarded a 3-year grant which has middle and high school students learning how to plant and sustain habitats and engage in best practices for water quality. It has also inspired residents to volunteer to engage in hands on activities. Future plans include an educational Center and green infrastructure training for professionals. The Niagara Waterkeeper organization is working together with the NTBGO to make it a restored buffer zone for native plants and wetland creatures as well as a thriving recreational area.

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The Carnegie Art Center had a difficult year to hold activities due to COVID-19 restrictions, but they attempted to hold virtual art shows to keep the center alive with cultural events and special programming. Classes were held virtually as well to keep the community engaged. The Carnegie Art Center has provided a wonderful venue for the community as well as the surrounding area for music and art appreciation.

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The Buffalo Niagara Nikola Tesla Council, Inc, a non for profit, has sought to bring the man of science his true distinction. A statue stands in a park in Buffalo to recognize his contributions to humanity with artificial lighting. Tesla pioneered AC technology by inventing the first AC motor in 1888 and harnessed the power of Niagara Falls to produce the electricity we have today from the Niagara Power Project.

This electricity was generated from Niagara Falls to Buffalo 23 miles away. Since NT was the midway point, with the historic electrical building on the corner of Robinson Street and the Twin City Highway, the Tesla council has met to discuss proposals for ways to show the part NT may commemorate the vital part the City played in Tesla's invention.

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Interest has been shown from a local radio station of the possibility to relocating to North Tonawanda. This is being investigated through the Mayor's office and the Lumber City Development Corporation as to the viability of any forth coming proposals. Not only would it provide a radio station for the surrounding WNY area but enhanced communication for NT residents also.

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In keeping with Energy efficiency, the City has partnered with Crimson Power Solutions to strive to keep us energy efficient but at the lowest cost possible. With the energy infrastructure now in place the City will be able to have the maximum savings in financial and health related services for NT. The new LED street lighting conversion and the NYSERDA Clean Community Program are 2 examples of success in the City. Presently ways to implement LED lighting at the DPW are being explored to further reduce energy costs.

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The small cemetery located on Walck Road and Erie Ave. is being researched by City Historian, Joe Midura. It dates back to 1890 and was in ownership by the St. Peter's Church. It was abandoned and now may be part of a City owned lot for upkeep. There is a rich history that the Historian is compiling which adds to the great heritage of NT German residents. The Children's Memorial Walkway still invites people who have lost a loved one to visit the beauty of the garden which was created solely by volunteers and donation funding.

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There are so many people to thank for all the support given during a year we all wish to forget. Thanks to Council members President Bob Pecoraro, Frank Dibernardo, Bob Schmigel, Austin Tylec, Eric Zadzilka, City Clerk Treasure Donna Braun, and City Attorney Luke Brown. My gratitude goes to Coz Capozzi, Chelsea Spahr, Barb Klenke, Jeff Zellner, John DiVirgilio, Dan DiVirgilio and all the staff at City Hall. Jason Koepsell, Mark Zellner, Chiefs Sikora and Krantz, and Alex Domaradzki deserve a thank you for your support for the decisions made during this difficult time. Many more individuals have helped to make this city a successful community and thanks go to them also.

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As we transition into 2021 with the hopes that the pandemic will allow us to open more programs and events in town, we are forever grateful to the residents of this wonderful community who have endured this trying time meeting all the restrictions faithfully. Our lives were turned upside down when everything closed and masks and social distancing were required, but through it all the community held together and did all they could to make our City safe. A big debt of gratitude to all residents who helped neighbors and friends to stay positive and well. Unfortunately, it is not over yet but with hope we will see a brighter day ahead and those events we so loved will return to our community once more. Our heart goes out to those who were ill with the virus and those who perished because of its rath.

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Previously before the pandemic NT was soaring ahead with new construction and businesses were thriving. Budget and sales tax by the county was on track to exceed projections before the pandemic began. Positive reports from the insurance companies showed our compensation claims from employees has put NT in a good position. All services were kept in operation for the residents due to the inter departmental cooperation of supervisors and workers. Unfortunately, since the COVID-19 outbreak things have changed dramatically. However, we were still able to construct a new budget that ensures City services will continue at a reasonable tax rate. Contact with our State Legislators to restore the AIM funding to its prior level has been made. We are always looking for different revenues and ways to operate more efficiently. The best financial practices as recommended by State Auditors have been put into effect. Appeals have been made to the Governor's office to reinstate the aide that has been cut to municipalities since it directly effects all taxpayers.

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It has been my honor to serve as Mayor of NT and I have truly enjoyed meeting so many tremendous people who live and work here. I thank all City Employees for their support in a difficult time. Working together we have made strides and, in the days, ahead we will continue to flourish. NT is a vibrant community full of potential with many amenities no other community has to offer. Thank you.