



STATE OF THE CITY ADDRESS

BY MAYOR EDDIE MORÁN

JANUARY 30, 2024



Good morning, valued citizens, community partners, and fellow elected officials.

I'm so thankful to stand before you this morning and deliver the State of the City address.

As mentioned earlier by Dr. Fitzgerald, we are gathered in this space dedicated to students in Nursing, Occupational Therapy, and Physician Assistant programs. Educational programs that I am pleased to say were supported by the City through the allocation of ARPA funding. A great example of the collective effort and dedication needed to continue to propel Reading forward.

I would like to begin my address with gratitude. So many of you deserve thanks for what you've done for our city and for me as your Mayor. The support, guidance, and contributions have enabled us to move forward down the path of success.

I extend my heartfelt thanks to the citizens of Reading for trusting in me with another four years of service. Your unwavering support fuels my commitment to our city's prosperity.

To my beloved family, I will forever be in debt for your encouragement, support, patience, and understanding as I embark on another term filled with opportunities and challenges. Your support sustains me in everything I do, each and every day.

I would also like to acknowledge the invaluable contributions of our partners in progress – elected officials, appointed leaders, non-profit organizations, civic groups, business owners, and dedicated volunteers. Together, we form a remarkable team committed to the advancement of Reading and the well-being of its residents.



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The State of the City is rising, folks.

Over the past four years, we have learned invaluable lessons, experienced significant growth, and remained focused on our community's priorities. Together, we've made a positive difference in Reading, which has set us on the path to a prosperous future.

Yes, we face our challenges; yes, we face obstacles, and yes, we have naysayers. We faced the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic and the tough economic times that followed, including recent inflation, yet through all of this, we came out stronger.

I am proud to acknowledge the good work our city staff, of over 560 individuals, has demonstrated. Their dedication and resilience in upholding our city's safety, infrastructure, and public services do not go unseen. Their positivity and tireless efforts have been key in navigating challenges and ensuring our community's well-being.

In the past year alone, we welcomed 70 new members to our workforce, with half of them being city residents. Notably, 76% of these new hires represent diverse backgrounds, such as Latino, African American, or Asian, reflecting our commitment to inclusivity and equal opportunity. Moreover, 100% possess high school diplomas, and 23% have college degrees, demonstrating that well-qualified talent is joining our team.

We also know how important it is to provide our youth with the skills and opportunities necessary to join the workforce. Through programs like Mayor Moran's Summer Youth Employment Initiative, we have provided educational training and employment opportunities to our city's young residents, empowering them to pursue personal and professional growth. This program not only addresses youth unemployment but also instills a strong sense of responsibility and work ethic among participants while positively impacting the community.



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In 2023, 51 students ranging in ages from 15-18 from Reading-area schools completed this eight-week program with remarkable outcomes: out of the participating seniors, 6 enrolled in secondary education, 2 joined the Armed Services, and 2 secured full-time positions within the City of Reading, laying the foundation for their future careers.

We proudly filled three key positions this year. We have named a new Police Chief and a new Parking Authority Executive Director and recently promoted a long-time Public Works manager to the position of Public Works Director.

I appointed Mr. Kyle Zeiber, a dedicated city employee with a remarkable tenure since 1988, to Director of Public Works. His wealth of experience and unwavering commitment make him an invaluable asset to our team. Let's give Kyle a warm welcome as the Director of Public Works.

Join me in also welcoming Police Chief Elias Vazquez, who brings over 26 years of law enforcement experience, including distinguished service with the Tampa Florida Police Department. We are excited that he will continue his law enforcement career here in Reading, as we believe his leadership will strengthen our commitment to public safety and community engagement. Unfortunately, Chief Elias Vazquez couldn't be here us today as he is in the midst of moving his family to this area.

We also extend a warm welcome to Mr. Rafael Batista, the new Executive Director of the Reading Parking Authority. With a focus on customer service and strategic parking management, Mr. Batista is prepared to enhance parking accessibility and encourage fair and consistent enforcement.

FINANCES

Now, turning to the City's Finances, a topic everyone wants to hear about, we have very good news. I am pleased to report that as of our last audited



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year, we have a general fund surplus of over \$48 million... yes, you heard correctly, \$48 million. A testament to our careful financial management despite challenges such as the loss of the commuter tax benefit when we exited Act 47. In addition, this surplus and the funds allocated through the American Rescue Plan Act have allowed us to complete over \$12 million in capital improvements, maintain essential services for our residents, and not increase real estate taxes.

And as you may know, to keep our strong economic outlook, we need to steadily increase revenue to meet rising expenses. In 2023, our General Fund Revenue surpassed expectations, totaling \$108.7 million, a \$5.7 million dollar increase, with strong performances in Earned Income Tax, Real Estate Transfer Tax, and Entertainment Tax.

Our Earned Income Tax, which accounts for 20% of the General Fund budget, brought in \$28.5 million, which is 122% of the \$23 million budgeted for 2023. This is a strong indicator that employment and wages in Reading are doing well.

Our Real Estate Transfer Tax brought in 7.9 million dollars, exceeding our budget by almost 2 million dollars.

And our Entertainment Tax was budgeted at \$650,000 dollars, and thanks in large part to the Berks County Convention Center Authority, the Santander Arena and Performing Arts Center, and the Fightin Phils, over 1 million dollars was collected.

I've been told not to use so many numbers in the State of the City address but to get a sense of our progress; numbers, especially when it comes to our finances, are an important part of our success story and need to be said.

These excess revenues benefit our city's financial health and help paint a much brighter future for our city.



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And we're not done yet; more is planned for 2024 and beyond. So let's talk a little bit about that.

PUBLIC SAFETY

Ensuring the safety and security of our residents, neighborhoods, and businesses remains a top priority for my administration.

As temperatures drop, it becomes crucial to provide not just warmth but also a safe, comfortable place for those in need. In collaboration with the Berks Coalition to End Homelessness, Opportunity House, and El Centro Hispano, we identified a facility capable of accommodating multiple families during the harsh winter months. Thanks to the City Council's approval of funding on December 28, 2023, the program welcomed its first two families just five days later, on January 2nd. Currently, we're sheltering approximately 18 families, comprised of 23 adults and 35 children, with two additional families scheduled to arrive shortly. I sincerely thank everyone who worked alongside of us to make this happen.

Investing in our emergency services is also vital to enhancing public safety, and we recognize the pressing need for reliable equipment within our Fire department, so we developed a plan to address this concern. Despite past efforts to allocate pockets of funding we never were able to significantly upgrade their fleet, so we decided that entering a lease program was the best solution. This program will allow us to upgrade our fleet over the next seven years, ensuring our firefighters have access to state-of-the-art equipment while stabilizing costs.

Already, we've obtained a new rescue truck, set to be in service by late February, and have 3 pumpers, 2 tiller ladders and urban brush unit scheduled for delivery in 2026. Furthermore, we've allocated a little over



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\$1.5 million dollars towards enhancing our fire stations, providing our personnel with safe and efficient working environments.

I extend my heartfelt appreciation to Chief James Stoudt for his steadfast leadership and unwavering commitment to the brave men and women of Reading's fire and emergency services department.

Crime also remains a challenge and concern within our society and city, and it sometimes seems more than we can handle. Just when progress is made in one area, another area pops up, and another solution must be found. Often, crime, including violent crime, comes in waves. It is heartbreaking to witness the suffering of our neighbors and our city, but I'm proud to report that there has been significant progress. The year with the highest number of crimes ever reported in the City was 1996, with 8,200 serious crimes reported. Over the years, we've witnessed a steady decline in serious crime. In 2023, we had 2,142 serious crimes, a fraction of past history. In fact, the last four years have had the lowest crime rates in decades. This positive trend, although impacted by external factors like the COVID-19 pandemic, showcases our collective efforts in fostering a safer city. I would like to thank all the Reading Police Officers and also thank you to Acting Chief Javier Ruiz for stepping up to the plate.

The Reading Police Department has also undertaken targeted initiatives to combat gun-related violence, expand our citywide camera system, and equip our personnel with updated technology. A Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency grant supports the Neighborhood Gun Violence Reduction details, investigations related to firearms, and multi-agency Cease Fire details.

An expansion of the City-wide Camera System framework has added 20 camera sites to the system, with further expansion scheduled to areas in the City that are currently not covered by the system. This expansion was



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largely supported by a PCCD Local Law Enforcement Support grant of \$1,000,000 awarded to our police department. This grant has also allowed for the purchase and updating of department computers and tablets to aid in the efficiency of their jobs.

I'm proud to announce that our collective efforts have been fruitful. The acquisition of a property to house our state-of-the-art public safety facility marks a significant milestone in our journey. This facility will be converted into a state-of-the-art public safety facility, enhancing the educational capabilities of our police and fire academies. but it also symbolizes our commitment to continue providing high-quality services to our community. It's a great example of what we can achieve when we work together towards a common goal.

The recent \$140,000 grant awarded to our police department from PCCD is also a testament to their service and dedication. This grant will not only aid recruitment and retention efforts but also underscore the trust and confidence placed in our law enforcement personnel by their community.

I've asked to have increased engagement with residents and community groups by both our police and fire departments, reaffirming our commitment and dedication to public safety beyond traditional enforcement measures.

And, as you may know, public safety goes beyond police, fire, and public works. It includes keeping our citizens safe from other hazards, which is why we secured grants to address health-related concerns, including health literacy in our community and lead contamination in homes.

Our Advancing Health Literacy grant has allowed staff to form fruitful partnerships with key community health partners such as

- Penn State Health, St. Joseph Medical Center
- Reading Hospital Tower Health



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- Berks Community Health Center
 - Berks Counseling Center
 - FaithCare
 - Reading Community Pharmacy

Through these partnerships, they have created detailed assessment reports for each organization, developed health literacy toolkits to provide tools and resources for health literacy improvement specific to the organization, and continue to support 6 health service institutions to implement projects that promote improved health literacy.

Staff also facilitated 6 community focus groups on patient experience and health materials. They completed a 2nd round of community surveys on COVID-19 uncertainty and health literacy; both surveys are currently being evaluated. They also hosted vaccination clinics where 306 were vaccinated and distributed 1,736 COVID-19 prevention kits. Executed a Health Misinformation initiative that included a video in English and Spanish, and a toolkit in which 345 English and 192 Spanish toolkits were distributed within the community.

In addition, we are also working hard to combat lead contamination in homes. With the help of grant funding, we have renovated 17 homes thus far, with 4 more projects underway. 20 families are in different stages of the review process, and an additional 23 families have had their homes tested for Radon gas, resulting in 2 having radon mitigation systems installed after high levels were detected.

The following is a story that started sad and finished with a positive outcome. After meeting one family at a community Halloween event, they went through the intake process, including a visual assessment and inspection. As a result, it was discovered that a child was biting and chewing the paint off a lead-positive windowsill, which prompted the homeowner to get the child tested. It was found that he had almost 10



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times what is considered an elevated lead level. Through this program, all the wooden windows, several doors, and trim components that had lead paint were removed, and this family now lives in a healthier home, all free of charge.

These initiatives just represent a fraction of our ongoing efforts to ensure a safer, healthier, and more resilient Reading. As we continue to tackle emerging challenges, I'm confident in our ability to continue building a better, brighter future for all residents.

QUALITY OF LIFE

The next topic for review is quality of life issues that affect our residents and visitors. One of those issues is parking. I am quite aware of the near crisis we experience with a lack of parking spaces throughout our city, especially in some neighborhoods. That's why I made it a priority to work with the Reading Parking Authority to increase parking opportunities in the city. Those efforts have significantly improved parking in many areas, but there is more work to do.

Another issue brought to my attention was the cost of parking violation fines. After listening to many of our citizens and visitors, I've lowered the fines for parking violations.

Although there will always be a level of enforcement, we are determined to reach a balance between discouraging illegal parking and charging reasonable fines for each type of violation.

We must also talk about all the transportation infrastructure improvements made in our city.

- This past year, the city paved over 6 miles of city streets, more than any other year in recent memory. Along with the paving, the city also installed 212 ADA curb ramps. The total cost to date was \$2.5 million,



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which was below the engineering’s estimate, and the contractor finished paving ahead of schedule.

- Over the past four years, the city has paved 20.32 miles of city streets. At a total cost of 15.7 million dollars, Liquid Fuels Tax paid 10 million of those costs. As part of this, hundreds of ADA ramps were included.

- If your downtown driving seems to be going a little smoother, it’s because the downtown traffic signals were re-timed late last year to improve circulation and flow of traffic.

- In addition, last year, all of the city’s 131 traffic signals were inspected, with repairs being made where needed to bring the signals up to permit spec.

- The River Road Extension Project was completed last spring, which added a new block of Lincoln Street between W. Windsor Street and W. Spring Street. This improvement opened a needed transportation route to the 50-acre industrial park.

COMMUNITY and ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Next is Community and Economic Development, which is another vital area that affects us all, and I am pleased to share some significant updates.

One of the most eagerly awaited developments in community and economic development is the imminent sale of the city-owned properties on the 500 block of Penn Street. This transaction marks a significant milestone in our downtown revitalization efforts, with anticipated plans of a diverse mix of retail spaces, residential apartments, and potentially entertainment venues, all aimed at enhancing the vibrancy of our city center.



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Next, turning our attention to the pressing need for clean, safe, and affordable housing in Reading, I am proud to highlight the promising proposal for the redevelopment of 1400 Hill Road, formerly the Central Catholic High School. This project not only offers a solution to our housing shortage but also breathes new life into a property that has sat dormant for over a decade. The unfortunate history of failed development attempts, leading to the sale of historic artifacts like stained-glass windows and becoming a target for vandals, as many unoccupied structures do, serves as a reminder of the challenges we face in revitalizing our urban landscape. By moving forward with the re-use of this historic building, we not only honor our city's heritage but also expand housing options for our residents. The proposed development will feature a range of living spaces, from cozy studios to spacious three-bedroom apartments, each designed to showcase the building's beautiful architecture.

In addition to these initiatives, I am pleased to announce that an affordable housing apartment building at Fifth and Franklin is nearing completion, as well as a major development project at 6th and Chestnut that will convert a current blighted property into much-needed affordable housing for seniors.

Progress is also underway at the former Dana site, with a sales agreement in place for the establishment of a frozen food distribution industry, promising economic growth and job opportunities for our city residents.

These projects complement the ongoing efforts of developers such as the Shuman Development Group, whose projects have already provided residential, retail, dining, and office spaces.

On the community development front, I am pleased to announce that the largest Community Block Grant projects each represent \$1,000,000



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dollar investment projects that will serve our community for many years to come, such as the renovation of the Reading Housing Authority Community Center, City Park enhancements that include specialized playground equipment and a water feature catering to children with special needs, as well as the long-awaited completion of the City's first All-Abilities playground at 3rd and Spruce playground demonstrating our commitment to inclusive recreational opportunities.

I would also like to acknowledge the importance of neighborhood upkeep. We have created a program to assist low-income homeowners in repairing broken sidewalks in front of their homes. This program has successfully completed 27 sidewalk repair projects, with 12 more currently underway, ensuring safer and more accessible pathways for our residents.

INFRASTRUCTURE IMPROVEMENT

Now, for more numbers! Thanks to careful fiscal management and the incredible support of ARPA funds, my administration has achieved remarkable advancements and improvements to our city's facilities! We've made significant investments in our recreational infrastructure, particularly focusing on enhancing our basketball and tennis courts. Remember, investing in our parks isn't just about improving physical spaces; it's an investment in the well-being of our children, young adults, and the community's overall health.

Please allow me to walk you through some of our proudest achievements:

We allocated \$4,431,211 towards revitalizing our parks. A significant portion of this investment went into resurfacing 11 basketball courts, including Baer Park, where we partnered with the Lonnie Walker IV to complete. Additionally, we've resurfaced a deck hockey rink and tennis and pickleball courts, ensuring our residents have access to inclusive recreational facilities.



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Other Public Property Projects

Additional efforts to enhance our city's infrastructure include the completion of \$1,366,000 in crucial upgrades to our library branches, including roof replacements and HVAC improvements. We've also undertaken construction and maintenance projects across numerous public properties, with a total cost of \$1,802,612.

We are far from done. This year, we have our sights on further improvements, which include:

- Rehabilitation of the City Park Bandshell Pond and structural repairs to the Bandshell.
- Rehabilitation of Egelman's Dam.
- Ventilation project for the William Penn Fire Tower.
- Rehabilitation of the Reading Iron Playground.
- Replacement of HVAC systems at City Hall and the Public Works main facility.
- Paving replacement at City Hall's Cedar St Parking Lot.
- Replacement of the splashpad at Barbey's Park.
- Replacement of stadium lights at Baer Park.
- Mechanical, electrical, and plumbing upgrades to the Pagoda.
- Structural repairs at the 8th and Court Fire Station.
- Building a long-awaited state of the art skate park, which will put Reading on the map and will be enjoyed by many who love the sport.
- AND more street paving.

We have also initiated engineering studies for several critical projects, including the Pagoda Wall, the Pagoda's Mechanical and Electrical systems, City Hall HVAC systems, and the Firefighters Museum. These studies are key in identifying project needs and laying the groundwork for future funding.

As you can see, we are not slowing down. Our momentum in revitalizing public infrastructure remains steadfast.



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Now, transitioning to the world of entertainment:

I'm happy to share that the Santander Arena and Performing Arts Center achieved record-breaking success in 2023, showcasing a diverse range of entertainment that resonated with the demographics of our city.

Notable performances included:

- Peso Pluma's "Doble P Tour," featuring the rising Mexican rapper whose music, inspired by regional Mexican rhythms, gained widespread acclaim and was shared heavily through social media platforms.
- Arcangel's "Just-In-Time Tour," highlighting the trailblazing artist's contribution as a pioneer to Reggaeton and Trap in Latin music.
- Juan Luis Guerra and Maluma's captivating back-to-back shows in October, where Juan Luis Guerra, a multi-award-winning Latin artist who has sold over 30M records worldwide, and singer-songwriter and rapper Maluma, known for his collaborations with global icons, mesmerized audiences with their unparalleled talent.
- Pedro Capo's soulful performance at the Santander Performing Arts Center, showcasing his Latin Grammy-winning prowess and hit single "Calma."

These exceptional events, complemented by the ongoing presence of children's shows, Broadway acts, the Reading Royals hockey team, and the City's Winter Wonderland free annual ice-skating event, underscore the vibrancy of our city's entertainment scene, and help bolster the city's entertainment tax.



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READING LIBRARY

Let's shine a spotlight on another gem in our community, The Reading Public Library. Committed to extending the joys of learning and exploration to all who seek it, the library continually strives to enhance its educational and recreational opportunities to our residents.

One of their biggest projects this year focused on bridging the digital divide in our community. They introduced a program to lend out Hotspots to patrons, initiated a comprehensive project to digitize our local history collection, and established two new positions dedicated to fostering digital literacy. Thanks to a \$22,000 grant from Truist Bank, a Bilingual Paraprofessional position was created that now offers bilingual reference assistance and leads bilingual computer classes. Additionally, the City allocated ARPA grant funds to support the appointment of a Digital Literacy Navigator, who teaches seniors how to navigate digital devices and use the internet for various purposes, including connecting with loved ones and accessing telemedicine services.

SUSTAINABILITY

In discussing the current state of our city, it's important to highlight our commitment to handling our environment with care. Under the guidance of the Public Works Sustainability Division, significant strides have been made toward fostering an eco-friendly community while responsibly managing our resources.

In doing so, we've partnered with over 230 divisions and organizations to assist us with 51 impactful events to advance our environmental goals throughout the Reading area. Keep Reading Beautiful, an affiliate



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program of Keep Pennsylvania Beautiful was established in August 2023. This program focuses on the beautification of our City, community outreach and education initiatives, and organizing events focused on litter and dumping abatement and prevention.

A result of our environmental efforts is the creation of "Lucky's Lane" at 339 S. 7th Street—a low-maintenance green space designed not only for community gatherings but also to combat stormwater runoff. This project was realized through a collaborative effort involving South 7th Street neighbors, the Berks County Conservation District, RAWA, interns from my Summer Youth Initiative, the South of Penn Task Force, and Barrio Alegria.

Our Sustainability Manager has been a featured speaker at ten conferences and forums centered on sustainability, energy transition, and community engagement, amplifying our city's innovative approaches in these areas.

In a bold move towards sustainable energy practices, we've invested in Renewable Energy Credits (RECs) to offset fossil-fuel-produced electricity. Notably, some of our critical infrastructures, such as traffic signals, streetlights, libraries, recreation centers, City Hall, fire stations, and our Public Works campus are now powered by 100% fossil fuel-free electricity, which comes from a mix of 40% renewable energy sources and 60% nuclear sources.

Another successful community outreach effort is the annual celebration of Earth Day Berks 2023, where we welcomed approximately 2,500 attendees and also commemorated Reading's 275th Anniversary by planting Red Maple trees—a symbolic gesture of our dedication to a greener, more sustainable future for our city.



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Solid Waste/Recycling/Clean City Program Division Activity

I would like to take a moment to recognize the dedicated individuals who work tirelessly to keep our City streets clean and our communities thriving. Our Solid Waste and Clean City team has achieved remarkable success in enhancing the quality of life for all residents.

I'm proud to report that our City Municipal Solid Waste Program continues to make significant strides. Enrollment has increased to 27,485 units, reaching an impressive 98% coverage rate. This achievement marks an incredible improvement from the 94% rate recorded at the end of 2022, effectively ensuring city-wide trash collection services.

Our Clean City team has also demonstrated unwavering commitment through their daily efforts. They've successfully completed 997 clean-ups and illegal dumping remediation projects, removing 116 tons of litter and trash, 638 bulky items from targeted sites across the city. Their dedication to maintaining a clean and safe environment is truly commendable.

In addition to the work done by our labor professionals, community engagement has been instrumental in our progress. Since the inception of the "Adopt-A-Block" program in May of 2022, 152 volunteer groups made up of 40 businesses, 84 residents, 14 non-profit agencies, 4 schools, 3 community groups and gardens, and 7 churches have been partnered with us in our mission to foster a cleaner city.

The collective impact of these groups is nothing short of remarkable. Together, they've completed 114 clean-up projects across the city, harnessing the energy of 1,579 volunteers. Their combined efforts have resulted in the removal of 33 tons of trash, litter, and bulky items, significantly enhancing the cleanliness and beauty of our neighborhoods.



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Sewers/Waste Water Treatment Plant

I must also highlight some of the remarkable achievements in 2023 from our Wastewater Treatment Plant (WWTP) team. For the first time since 2015, we completed the year without any effluent discharge violations. This accomplishment stands as a testament to our team's hard work combined with the effectiveness of the extensive upgrades to the liquid treatment process implemented at the Waste Water Treatment Plant.

I am also particularly proud to announce that Bill Reilly, our esteemed Wastewater Manager, has been honored with the prestigious Dan Treat Memorial award by the Eastern PA Water Pollution Control Operators Association. This award recognizes Bill's exceptional leadership and commitment to excellence in managing a facility treating greater than 2 million gallons per day (MGD). Bill's expertise and dedication have played a pivotal role in our success, and this recognition is a well-deserved testament to his contributions.

MOVING AHEAD!

As we gather here today to reflect on the past year's achievements, let's also celebrate and embrace the opportunities ahead with unwavering optimism. Together, we stand ready to elevate our city into an inspiration of inclusivity, prosperity, diversity, and unyielding community spirit.

It's often said that progress is not a destination but a journey. I realize, we all realize, that we need to improve, and together we will. This past year, through the dedication and collaboration of our citizens, businesses and community partners, and city officials, we've continued to lay the groundwork for a brighter future. Every individual contribution and every team effort has played an important role in shaping our city's road toward prosperity.



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As we look towards the future, I am committed to fostering an environment of continuous improvement. A thorough review of city hall policies, procedures, and systems will ensure that we operate with maximum efficiency and effectiveness, always keeping the needs of our citizens at the forefront.

Additionally, revitalization is a priority. I intend to foster more development in the city, especially in our core downtown. I plan to actively engage our small businesses in the planning process so we can tailor our efforts to express their vision and that of other stakeholders. Together, we will showcase the vibrancy of Reading to not only our residents but also to visitors.

In closing, I extend my heartfelt gratitude to each and every citizen who has believed in and contributed to our shared goal of Building a Better Reading TOGETHER. Only through our collective efforts will we continue to thrive and prosper as a City.

May God Bless each and every one of you, the City of Reading, Berks County.

CITY OF READING



PENNSYLVANIA

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