CITY OF READING PENNSYLVANIA

STATE OF THE CITY ADDRESS
BY MAYOR EDDIE MORÁN
JANUARY 30, 2025

¡Buenos días a todos! Good morning, everyone.
It is truly wonderful to see you all here this morning. I would like to recognize our State and local elected officials, members of my Administration, community leaders, partners, neighbors, and friends. Your presence speaks volumes to your dedication to our city and its future.

Before I get started and dive into the heart of today's State of the City, I want to take a moment to acknowledge the impact that recent developments at the federal level may have on our community.
My administration is actively working with partners to gather reliable information and resources to ensure that we stay informed and prepared to support our residents.

Now, with that said, let's recognize the incredible energy and spirit in this room. Please, take a look around you. Each person here has contributed in their own way to the growth of Reading. Whether your role has been as an advocate, a leader, a partner, or simply a resident who deeply cares, you play an important role. You represent the resilience of our community. You serve as a reminder of the passion and commitment that will be important on our journey forward. Today, you will hear me often say, together, we can do more.

Together, we have faced many challenges, celebrated victories, and above all else we continue to push forward a vision of prosperity and opportunity.
I want to personally thank each of you for believing in what we can achieve together. Thank you for lending your voices, effort, and support to help build a city that continues to shine brighter.

Now, let's talk about where we are and what lies ahead for our great city.

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Over the past year, we have made significant progress. While challenges remain, I am incredibly proud of what we've accomplished. Make no mistake—Reading is not just ready for what is ahead; it is actively advancing on its path to growth and revitalization.
As I share with you the state of our city, I want to go beyond the data. I want to highlight the moments, achievements, and milestones that showcase the dedication of our staff, the value of our partnerships, and the strength of our community. Even the very place where we are gathered today—the Redner's Event Center and FirstEnergy Stadium—represents this vision. With a $4.5 million dollar investment of City ARPA funding, this venue demonstrates the impact of public investment and the power of collaboration.

2024 was about finding solutions that will allow future generations to succeed. It was about creating opportunities, revitalizing infrastructure in our neighborhoods, and investing in our small businesses.
Every project we completed and every initiative we launched stood on one principle: building a city where everyone feels welcome, supported, and proud to call Reading home for themselves, their family or their business.
A critical part of building a strong and united community is making sure residents, visitors, and businesses feel safe through our public safety efforts. Under the leadership of our new Police Chief, Elias Vasquez, the Reading Police Department has remained committed to crime reduction through strategic initiatives and innovative approaches. We also appreciate that our non-profit partners work hard to reduce violence through programmatic efforts. We all have a role to play; this is how we achieve more together.
In 2024, Part A Crimes decreased by 21% compared to 2023, reflecting a significant step forward in making our city safer. Among these crimes, motor vehicle thefts saw a 9% reduction.

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Gun violence also declined, with non-fatal shootings being reduced by 18% from the previous year. The department also removed over 180 illegal firearms from our streets and conducted 3,201 directed patrols, averaging 9 per day, in high-crime areas helping to proactively reduce violent crimes and create safer neighborhoods.

Community engagement is also at the foundation of our public safety efforts. Reading Police Officers participated in 29 community events last year. Their participation helps build confidence and trust with our youth and overall community. They also serve as great opportunities to educate citizens about the importance of public safety.

Other initiatives led by the Reading Police Department include Park and Walk and Public Roll Calls. Both programs have officers walking neighborhoods and creating personal interactions with residents to restore trust, build collaboration, and foster engagement, which is at the heart of true safety.

Reading Police Officer's life-saving interventions were equally impactful, such as, deploying Narcan to save lives by reversing the incidents of opioid overdoses. These emergency actions highlight the success of the department's training to address the opioid crisis. Another essential component to public safety is having a strong and effective force.
In 2024, we were able to make progress in the recruitment process.
With the support of City Council, we were able to make improvements to the hiring process by the passage of Act 120 Candidate Exception.
This allows for certified officers from other municipalities to join the Reading Police Department without having to go through the lengthy civil service testing cycle.

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We were also able to position ourselves as a competitive employer by introducing a grant-funded $5,000 hiring bonus, helping us attract candidates which in turn helps us address staff shortages.

Advancement in our Police Department also hit a historic milestone this year with the promotion of the first female Deputy Chief, Luz Shade. This achievement highlights our commitment to equality and excellence in leadership, setting a powerful example for the future of the Reading Police Department.

We are also focused on making significant investments in technology and training to strengthen the Police Department's ability to serve and protect our community. One of these critical initiatives is the Skyline Drive Camera System, which will place 55 high-resolution cameras in 11 strategic locations along Skyline Drive. A half-million dollar investment in this advanced system will improve our ability to respond swiftly to incidents and serve as a powerful tool in deterring crime.

While our police department plays a vital role in keeping our community safe, when we talk about Public Safety, we must also recognize the work of our Reading Fire Department, under the leadership of Fire Chief James Stoudt. Their commitment to protecting lives and property is equally as important in ensuring the safety of our city. In 2024, the department responded to over 26,000 calls, including 65 structure fires and 509 vehicle accidents. Their efforts saved more than $1.7 million dollars in property and helped limit fire losses to just over a half-million dollars. Beyond this incredible work, they also aided in 2,000 lift assists and non-emergency calls as well as administered life-saving measures when needed, underscoring their essential role in public health and safety.

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The data from fire calls and emergency responses not only highlights their dedication but also the importance of investing in the infrastructure that supports their work. Strengthening our facilities and resources ensures they can continue serving our community effectively.

A significant day that reflects this sentiment is the opening of the 9th & Marion Fire Station last September—a project years in the making. This serves as another example of the impact public investment can have. This station has revitalized the neighborhood and supports our fire personnel significantly with a modern, state-of-the-art facility.

Modernizing the department's equipment has been another key focus. In 2024, we acquired new apparatus, including Engine 3 and Engine 9, Rescue 1, specialized vehicles such as UTVs, and a new paramedic unit. These investments provide our firefighters with the necessary equipment to respond quickly and effectively, no matter the challenge.

We have invested not only in infrastructure and resources but also in our personnel who make this life and property-saving work possible. Last year, six new firefighter/EMT trainees and three paramedics joined the department. This helped us address shortages due to retirements and guaranteed that we are prepared to meet the growing demands of our city. Looking ahead, we've added 12 additional positions in our 2025 budget to enhance our fire department and ensure they have the support needed to continue serving and protecting Reading. Equally important is our commitment to their health and safety. Firefighter injuries were significantly reduced in 2024, with only eight minor injuries reported—a reflection of the department's training and preparation.

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We also continued to provide the City-funded Reading Professional Firefighters Cancer and Disease Screening program. This program provided screenings to 127 participants, where 148 actionable findings were identified, highlighting the importance of early cancer and disease detection and care. This is a powerful example of how seriously we take our responsibility to take care of those who protect us. The Cancer and Disease Screening program will continue in 2025 for firefighters while we also explore making it available to our entire workforce because we are all in the business of saving lives.

Just as public safety is essential to protect our community, our public works department is working just as hard to maintain our streets, parks, fleet, and equipment while providing reliable services such as clean-ups, sustainability initiatives, and capital projects that reflect the bright future we are all working towards. The Solid Waste Division of Public Works focused on the fundamentals in 2024—ensuring our neighborhoods remained clean, safe, and welcoming. They tackled the long-standing challenge of illegal dumping and achieved remarkable results. Our Clean City team conducted 837 clean-ups, removing over 102 tons of trash and bulk items from our neighborhoods. Their hard work was supported by 173 Adopt-a-Block volunteers, who joined forces with city teams to organize 95 city-wide clean-ups. Again, this demonstrates that together, we can do more.

We also made significant strides in updating our public buildings and spaces. Critical infrastructure projects like the City Hall's HVAC system upgrade, security enhancements, and building improvements at various properties such as the 8th & Court Fire Station are just a few of the projects that set the stage for safer and more efficient city operations.

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We also paid special attention to our parks, greenspace, landmarks, and other shared spaces that create connection, recreation, and pride in our city. 155 ADA-compliant ramps were installed across the city, making our streets and public areas more accessible. Recreational spaces were given significant upgrades, such as the Baer Park Splash Pad and lighting installation, updates to basketball courts citywide, the City's first-ever All Abilities Playground at 3rd & Spruce Park, and the opening of Reading's premier skatepark. The skatepark, located on South 6th and Canal Streets, was a $2.3 million dollar project funded primarily by the City with support from DCED, DCNR, and private donations. A decade-long dream of JD Turner, owner of Holistic Skate Shop and member of the Reading Skatepark Association, this project is a true testament to the power of community advocacy and teamwork. Again, together, we can do more.

The revitalization of Centre Park is another project that began with the vision of the Centre Park Historic District and was brought to life by my directive to fund the $1 million dollar construction project. The City was recently recognized for this revival effort as a top building and construction project by Lehigh Valley Business. A nod to the park's significant upgrades that now provide space for the community to enjoy for generations to come.

The restoration of the Pagoda is another project that began last year and will continue into 2025. The $5 million dollar investment in updating the mechanical and electrical systems ensures that this iconic landmark will be preserved as a significant beacon of our city for generations to come.

It is equally important to focus on how we care for our environment, which is why we prioritize sustainability initiatives, ensuring that our city's growth is impactful not only today, but also for future generations.

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Over the last year, our Wastewater Treatment Plant team treated 6 billion gallons of water, completed over 43,000 work orders, and maintained a perfect compliance record with zero violations. Our Solid Waste Division participated in 47 environmental events, engaging nearly 3,000 attendees and partnering with over 200 organizations to amplify their impact. These efforts highlight our commitment to serve as stewards of our natural resources.

Our sustainability efforts are far from over. This year, we will see the removal of the Bushong Mill Dam, a $2 million dollar state and city-funded project that will restore the natural flow of Tulpehocken Creek while eliminating hazards and creating new recreational opportunities. We have also committed a $1.4 million dollar investment into Egelman's Dam, ensuring its safety and maintenance for years to come.
Another step forward in our sustainability efforts is the $18 million-dollar GESA Energy Efficiency Project, which will modernize city infrastructure with L.E.D. lighting, solar panels, and HVAC upgrades. Through this initiative, Reading will be on the path to achieving 100% renewable energy by 2050, delivering impressive cost savings and reducing our carbon footprint.

Just as the Public Works Department has been instrumental in shaping our city's physical spaces, the Department of Community Development has been equally transformative in driving progress.

The Building and Trades team processed an impressive 1,677 permit applications—1,149 residential and 528 commercial— and completed 391 detailed plan reviews. The Zoning Office served approximately 1,900 visitors, assisting residents and businesses in navigating city zoning processes.

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They also addressed 108 complaints and issued 190 enforcement actions across zoning, property maintenance, and building categories, ensuring accountability and compliance were met. The Planning team helped advance our city's development, working with Zoning to process 193 permit applications and 161 permit review completions focusing on efficiency and accessibility. 51 site visits were conducted, and 40 enforcement actions were issued. This work is critical in shaping our future for Reading.

The Property Maintenance team addressed over 4,500 cases citywide. Their work included 1,180 property maintenance inspection cases, 2,473 code enforcement cases, 914 quality-of-life violations, and 54 emergency inspections. Through our state-funded Lead Hazard Program, we abated 25 units with an additional 19 pending. The City further supported this effort by allocating additional funding to abate 18 more units, demonstrating how my Administration is taking proactive measures to enhance livability in our city.

Affordable housing is currently a crisis that many are facing locally and nationally. It is a critical part of Community Development's mission and will remain a priority. As the year ended, the department was on track to deliver 125 new housing units and aim to complete 500 units by the end of my second term. The Community Development Department also secured $1.4 million dollars in federal community project funding to assist in the remediation of blighted properties, creating more opportunities for redevelopment and revitalization. This is another step forward in addressing the long-standing housing challenges. To support our commitments to affordable housing and access, my Administration provides programming through the Human Relations Commissions to assist with the various facets of rental assistance and rapid rehousing.

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These efforts are part of a larger vision to expand housing access and address the current local crisis.

Our commitment to community development doesn't stop there—it extends to the non-profit organizations committed to helping our residents and community. Investing in our nonprofit partners empowers them to address critical needs and create opportunities for families, youth, and residents across Reading.Through the strategic use of ARPA funding, we have supported organizations that serve our most vulnerable populations.
To name a few:

- $500,000 dollars to the Hope Rescue Mission to establish the Lighthouse Women's Shelter, a safe haven for women in need, and their children.
- $200,000 dollars to the Opportunity House towards the expansion of their men's shelter and day room, increasing their capacity to serve those experiencing homelessness.
- $500,000 dollars to Helping Harvest to expand services in the City of Reading, including a commercial community kitchen in Downtown Reading.
- $200,000 dollars to the Latino Chamber of Commerce to assist Spanish-speaking small business owners with career and workforce development.
- $400,000 dollars to Berks Community Health Center to purchase a site in Oakbrook to expand healthcare services for underserved residents.
- $125,000 dollars to New Journey Community Outreach to add commercial refrigerators to expand their capacity to distribute fresh food to families in need.
- $100,000 dollars to the Salvation Army to assist with critical HVAC repairs, ensuring their facilities remain welcoming and functional.
- $1 million dollars to FINANTA, formerly the Community First Fund, to create a credit union to serve low-income and unbanked populations.

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In 2024, 47 small businesses received ARPA funding through individual grant awards ranging from $25,000 dollars to $50,000 dollars. These investments have been instrumental in helping our businesses recover and grow. While 13 projects were completed by the end of 2024, 34 projects are slated for completion by the end of June 2025. To ensure this deadline is met, city employees are working with each business to ensure they have the tools, resources, and guidance needed to succeed.

We're not just investing in projects—we're investing in people, in their dreams, and the true backbone of our economy. These investments again demonstrate how we can do more together, and our partnerships amplify impact.

Building on the power of partnerships, we are investing in ways to connect, engage, and serve our community better. The city introduced the Reading311 application, which replaced the outdated Reading iRequest platform, allowing anyone to submit any issues or concerns via their mobile device. Another innovation is the ongoing implementation of EnerGov, a modern software solution designed to streamline permitting, licensing, and code enforcement. A key feature of this system is the Self-Service Portal, which allows users to access zoning and permitting services online, enabling real-time tracking and electronic payments. By adopting innovative tools like these, we foster a more efficient operating environment for residents and businesses. These innovative programs are paving the way, but are just one part of the story.

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The revitalization of Downtown Reading is a priority for the City. While we acknowledge that there is still a lot of work to be done, progress is evident, and the momentum is undeniable. Small businesses are opening their doors, and a new foundation is being laid to support those who have stood the test of time, those currently investing in the city's future, and those who will join us as they see the vision come to life. We have a dedicated team of City employees working tirelessly to keep our downtown clean and inviting, ensuring that our streets reflect the pride of our community.

Entertainment venues like the Santander Arena, the Performing Arts Center, and the Miller Center for the Arts continue to expand their events to include diverse programming that brings people together for unforgettable experiences. The GoggleWorks Center for the Arts, another great Downtown Reading gem, has the GoggleWorks II expansion project underway, which the City is proud to have supported with a half-million dollars in ARPA funding. Outdoor events steadily grew last year, breathing energy into our streets and showcasing incredible local talent and entrepreneurship. The Downtown Reading First Friday Block Parties have become a great place to highlight local businesses, artists, and entrepreneurs in a fun celebration of community spirit.

Collaborative events like Downtown Reading's Taco Fest, Color Fest, and the Glow Block Party partnered with Nemesis Fitness' Cinco de Mayo, Color, and Glow fun runs—have introduced new traditions, drawing over 3,000 people to our Downtown each time. The Reading Roots series, another collaborative event with the Downtown Reading Division, the GoggleWorks Center for the Arts, and the Penn Street Market, offered a social night market event featuring fresh produce, live entertainment, and a diverse group of artists showcasing their artwork.

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We also supported the Latino Chamber of Commerce's annual Puerto Rican Day Parade and Festival, bringing approximately 10,000 visitors to Reading each year. Beloved events like the Mayor's Halloween on Penn, the City Holiday Parade, Tree Lighting, Menorah Lighting in collaboration with the Jewish Federation, and the WWII parade that kicks off the World War II Weekend celebration, done in partnership with the Mid-Atlantic Air Museum, continue to draw visitors and celebrate our heart and history.

Downtown Reading is more than a place—it is a community in motion, building a stronger, more connected future with each new business, event, and collaboration. The tools are being set in place to support the growth and revitalization of Downtown Reading. The return of rail service to downtown is on the horizon. This long-anticipated project will reconnect our city with the region, making Reading more accessible than ever and opening the door to new economic opportunities and tourism.

As a founding member of the Schuylkill River Passenger Rail Authority, this will remain a long-term priority for me. Restoration of passenger rail will ensure a lasting legacy that reflects how we rebuilt Reading together and serve as a model of how much more we can do when we achieve that synergy, as I often mention. Building on this momentum, one of our most impactful achievements is successfully submitting the City Revitalization and Improvement Zone (CRIZ) application. Aligned with State priorities, this designation will unlock impactful funding opportunities that will help drive economic growth and attract critical investments to our downtown and other key areas across the city. Every investment, innovation, and decision we make directly impacts the youth of Reading—a responsibility I hold close to my heart. Together, our collective efforts are creating the foundation for future generations.

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As we all continue to plant our seeds, it is essential that we also empower the next generation of leaders, which is why one initiative that will always be extra special to me is the Mayor's Summer Youth Employment Program -- a program I am proud to say was a personal project that was designed to uplift Reading youth by providing opportunity and access.

In June of 2024, we welcomed 52 students into the program, offering them hands-on experience, valuable skills, and exposure to post-secondary opportunities. These students didn't just learn about hard work; they witnessed the tangible impact they could have on their city through civic engagement. They saw firsthand the important role they played in shaping our community. For me, this program has always been about giving our youth a glimpse of what they can achieve, building their confidence so they can pursue their goals and dreams, and showing them the importance of public service. By investing in their potential, we are also helping them to build pride in their city, as the future of Reading will one day be in their hands. It gives me great pride that a number of young people have graduated and gained employment with the city after completing this program.

This commitment to connection and opportunity also extends to our community spaces, like the Reading Public Library. In 2024, the library continued to empower residents by ensuring everyone in Reading had the tools they needed to grow, learn, and succeed. One of the Reading Public Library's most impactful accomplishments last year was the expansion of its Digital Literacy Navigator Program, a lifeline for seniors, homebound residents, and anyone seeking to navigate the complexities of the digital age.

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The library has also undergone modernization to serve our community's needs more efficiently. With the support of City funding, 53 outdated computers were replaced across library branches, enabling more than 53,500 computer sessions in 2024 alone, which allowed residents to apply for jobs, access vital government services, and connect with critical resources that made a positive difference in their daily lives. Programming at the library grew in 2024, drawing over 8,000 attendees across 633 events that included STEM programming for children and Spanish-language workshops for residents.

What a powerful testament to a shared vision for a better city—one defined by opportunity, access, innovation, and inclusion. The library's success, paired with the City and community's support, is another great example of how, together, we can do more.

This shared vision is also rooted in the financial strength we have built together as a city. I am proud to share that Reading continues to demonstrate responsible fiscal management, with over $109 million dollars in General Fund revenues this past year.

Real estate transfer tax remained strong, bringing in $6.5 million dollars in revenue.

Our Earned Income Tax raised over $24 million dollars, which points to a strong workforce, and Sewer Transfer revenues at $3 million dollars show a strong foundation for steady growth. These revenues have demonstrated the vitality of our local economy and allowed us to advance key projects—all without raising property taxes for the last 5 years.

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Our city has also protected its financial future by maintaining nearly $40 million dollars in unassigned fund balance reserves, surpassing the $22 million dollar City requirement. This surplus is a testament to the disciplined financial practices we've upheld since exiting Act 47, ensuring we're ready to meet challenges and seize new opportunities while maintaining a careful balance to build a better, stronger city—one that prioritizes its people, its services, and its future.

In 2025, we will act boldly and strategically with a $118.3 million dollar General Fund budget, underscoring our commitment to delivering essential services, advancing infrastructure improvements, and supporting community programs while exercising strong fiscal responsibility.

In 2025, we are realizing those efforts to deliver and advance essential service and infrastructure improvements through vital capital improvement projects. We are committing approximately $6 million dollars to citywide street paving, improving over 5 miles of road surface to ensure safer and more accessible streets for residents, businesses, and visitors.

Public parks and recreation remain an important component of our public investments. This year, we have dedicated $4 million dollars, which includes grant funding, to the Hillside Splash Park project; additional public infrastructure investment includes $250,000 dollars for a new water feature at Barbey's Playground and $800,000 dollars for an outdoor ice-skating rink. I want to take a moment to thank our federal partners, especially for Congresswoman Houlahan's leadership in securing significant federal funding to support community projects like the 11th and Pike gymnasium replacement, which will provide an upgraded facility for the Reading Recreation Commission to continue providing youth programming.

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We look forward to working with all of our federal partners to make sure the funding is delivered.

Whether completed or in process, these projects represent more than just dollars spent—they are creating the momentum necessary to truly propel Reading forward and ignite the engine that will help us get to the next level.

That engine is the City Revitalization and Improvement Zone (CRIZ) program. The CRIZ program funds transformational projects through powerful economic development tools and public-private partnerships. These tools ensure that every dollar invested generates $4 in private investment—an outstanding multiplier effect that drives real impact for future investment, development, and economic strength that will help revitalize neighborhoods and our downtown.

CRIZ is also about giving businesses, developers, and local entrepreneurs the confidence to build here and believe in the limitless potential that Reading has. By integrating the CRIZ with our downtown strategy passed in 2024, and aligning those efforts with local businesses, developers, community organizations, and state agencies, we will unlock the full potential of this economic development tool.

As we maximize the potential of the CRIZ, we are also modernizing our internal operations to create a seamless experience for businesses and developers. With 28 key performance indicators in place, we are tracking progress in job creation, economic impact, and vacancy rate reductions.

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As I've said before, Reading is ready.

Ready to lead boldly, to create opportunities that drive redevelopment, and to build an economy that works for everyone. We are ready to show the world what happens when we embrace diversity, value every voice, and work together toward shared progress. We are ready to transform innovative ideas into meaningful action, building a future rooted in connection, growth, and pride for all. The state of our city is strong. It is strong because of the people who see the promise and potential of this community. It is strong because of the residents and businesses who call Reading home. And it is strong because of the countless ways that people-- like the ones in this room —show up daily for our city. Your hard work and commitment are what makes us ready. Ready to not only face challenges—because there will always be challenges—but, more importantly, to seize every opportunity.

As we reflect and celebrate our accomplishments, I call on every single person here, whether online or in-person, to walk forward with me — with your neighbors, your family, your businesses, walk with those you meet in this room today. And despite the complexities we face, do not let that deter you. Remember to walk together with purpose toward our shared vision of building a better Reading. A stronger Reading. We have proven what is possible when we invest in our people, strengthen our institutions, and commit to a shared vision of progress. Every action we take from this day forward should reflect our strength, resilience, and ambition. Our city's future will be shaped by those who believe in the power of unity, community, and opportunity—not by the naysayers or those who criticize from the sidelines.This is our moment to seize. Let's move forward together, fueling our progress with the promise of what lies ahead. Together, we CAN do more. Together, we WILL do more—because Reading is READY.

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Thank you all. May God bless you, the United States of America, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and the City of Reading.

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