



City of Auburn, Maine

Office of the Mayor

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## STATE OF THE CITY ADDRESS

Mayor Jason J. Levesque | Monday, January 28, 2019

Good evening, Auburn. It is my honor to appear before you on this special occasion. I'm proud to bring back a long-forgotten tradition here in Auburn – the "State of the City" address.

Some of you might be wondering, why would the Mayor of Auburn deliver a State of the City Address? Rest assured, I don't think I am the President or Governor. But, one year into my service as your Mayor, I DO think it's meaningful and critically important to share what I view as our greatest successes as well as some of the challenges and opportunities we are facing.

In 1869, our founders realized how special our city was and the growing influence it could have throughout the state and region. In those early days, they understood how vitally important it was to deliver a seminal address outlining success and strengths, as well as lessons learned from failure. They also celebrated residents who made a significant contribution to the City, and outlined smart new policies and initiatives, laying the groundwork for future success of our municipality.

Over the years, something happened that changed the way we think of ourselves and our future. I think of it as a "gloom" of sorts, one that unfortunately lasted for several generations. Somewhere along the way, we stopped thinking of the future, and believing in ourselves and our community. We lost sight of our desire to leave a positive legacy and settled for squabbling over small issues that by their very nature, held us back from realizing our true potential.

I am pleased and proud to report that those days are well behind us. Auburn is thriving. Pride in our community is strong, and the State of the City is one of promise and opportunity!

In the past year, we have moved past animosity between Council and Staff, conflict between elected officials and quasi-municipal and non-governmental organizations. We tackled a tough budget and made decisions supporting growth within our City, while keeping property tax increases in-line with the rate of inflation. We have left behind the bitter merger debate, and we are entering our Sesquicentennial year with a renewed sense of pride in our community and optimism for our future.

When I think of 2018, I can't help but think of the old saying, "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger." We are stronger, of that I am certain.

I would like to thank the members of our City Council for the work they do each day in service to this community. While we might not agree on every issue, we always come together and work hard to focus on the future of our City and the people who live here. One notable example: Councilor Walker and Councilor Gerry serve as Co-Chairs of my Ad-Hoc Committee on Age-Friendly Community. Working side-by-side, and with community partners, these councilors have energized our community, created new programming, helped Auburn become an "AARP Age-Friendly City" and most recently, have spearheaded our soon-to-be constructed Auburn Senior Center.

That is just one example of the heartfelt service, dedication and commitment of your Auburn City Councilors. Each one of these people cares deeply about this City and work tirelessly on your behalf. Please help me thank them.

I would like to thank City Manager Crichton and his dedicated staff, who in the past year have responsibly focused time and resources to invest in our future. You won't find a more loyal, committed, energetic team of people, in fact they call themselves "Team Auburn," which just demonstrates how focused they are on the success and well-being of our City.

I would also like to recognize Jody Durisko, the Manager's Executive Assistant, for taking the lead and doing the hard work needed to move tax acquired properties to sale. This important work allows languishing properties to be rehabilitated and raises the quality of our neighborhoods. I encourage staff to continue this important work. Encouraging developers to build market-rate housing and bring commercial development to our City makes us all stronger.

I commend and thank the incredible team of residents and staff, led by Clifton Greim, who are in the midst of our Strategic Planning process. These people are working to enhance our quality of life and help to grow our City. I have attended these meetings, and these folks love Auburn. They have energy and optimism; and they are focused and committed to this process. As they finish this important work, I encourage them to develop a well thought out, financially responsible, creative and prioritized road map that the Council and Staff can use daily to make Auburn the best small city in New England!

Here in Auburn, we have a robust team of elected officials, Staff, and hundreds of community volunteers from all walks of life. None of what we will accomplish in the future will be possible without their hard work.

On that note, let's take a moment to recognize what they have to work with: a city that is strategically located with beautiful, clean air; road and rail access to the rest of Maine and the world. We have a city with pristine natural resources, which provide us the unique ability to have a vibrant urban core, with beautiful natural vistas and countless recreational opportunities. Auburn is a city with potential that is still only dreamed of.

Friends, as we look ahead to 2019 and beyond, we need to rally around a mission. One that will guide us and our decisions that will build Auburn for the next 150 years. A mission of growth through opportunity. By providing the opportunity for people to build their lives, raise their families and their financial success, growth will be the end result, and this will benefit all of us for generations to come.

Why should we want growth? Quite simply because with growth comes prosperity. Not just for a select few, but for the entire community, through meaningful property tax relief and increased recreational and cultural opportunities.

We must embrace growth and what it means for our City now and in the future. We can't shy away from the challenge. Policy decisions, no matter how trivial they might seem today, can have a long and lasting impact.

I believe that perception is just as important as policy. How we look at our City and how others view it truly does matter.

An effective marketing campaign can change not only how we look at ourselves, but how the world looks at us. Just look at our Sesquicentennial celebration that we kicked off on New Year's Eve! We had an epic event built through an impactful TV and web marketing campaign. Both of these initiatives have been met with almost universal praise. People from across Maine are now looking at Auburn with interest - and in some cases, envy!

I want to recognize Liz Allen, Auburn's Communications and Compliance Director (the first in Maine, I believe). Liz is truly our municipality's communications rock, and what we have accomplished is largely due to her hard work and imagination.

I feel strongly that we must continue this work. It will lead to more people moving to our City, and to businesses expanding and/or locating here. It's this simple: a great "brand" is a valuable asset. When combined with exceptional, mindful city planning (and a strong Strategic Plan), great marketing can help a city attract everything from tourists to investors. It can also boost residents' pride.

I challenge our business community, led by some outstanding organizations such as the Auburn Business Association, and the Auburn Business Development Corporation, to help fund a campaign that will highlight Auburn. I further propose that the City Manager allocate \$25,000 in matching funds for this purpose as well. This private public partnership is another way that Auburn can position our community for success.

To make effective use of these marketing dollars, and in order to gain the best possible return on investment, I ask that the Council give direction to the City Manager to create a true communications department; one that is focused on continuing to grow what Ms. Allen and others have pioneered. The efforts of a such a team will, no doubt, have a regional impact, because we all know that when we work together, we all rise.

Another of our most critical priorities is to finish the work started in 2017. Council, you will soon receive a modernization of the Agriculture and Resource Protection ordinance first originated in 1964. You will see a well thought out Ordinance that encourages small- and large-scale agricultural growth, while protecting green space and our rural appeal. With your adoption of this Ordinance, we should see a sustainable growth in farm-related activities, younger farmers working the land and adding to our community, and financial security for more established farmers who have worked the land their entire lives and wish to pass along that tradition to a new generation. We will bring fairness back to the entire City of Auburn.

You will hear the voice of the opposition, who advocate for maintaining the status quo and the failing policy of the last 55 years.

I urge you to rise above the "noise." Remember that when we are not moving forward, we are actually taking steps backward. Be thoughtful in your deliberation and remember that as leaders, you must represent what is best for the entire city of Auburn.

As we tackle what I see as unfair practices in our rural areas, we must also recognize the need for a strong urban core. While we have one of the most beautiful downtowns in Maine, its potential for growth is equally impressive. We need to implement policy that encourages practical development.

We have an incredible downtown historic area - from Main Street to Spring, from Court Street to Academy. Let's help local property owners rehabilitate distressed properties! Let's improve the aesthetics of our older housing stock and focus on turning vacant lots into desirable market rate housing. And let's do this through wise application of effort, both volunteer and staff, as well as local and Federal Community Development Back Grant funding. Our future success is as tied to our downtown as our past was.

I truly believe that the future of Auburn lies in how people view our commitment to education.

It's not enough to just put together four walls and a roof and call it a school. We must design and build a first-rate facility, staffed with the best teachers, using the best curriculum, and offering the most opportunities for our youth possible. We are poised to make a decision on a new high school; one that will not just educate future generations, but will serve as a hub of education, sports and culture. If done correctly, and with an eye to the future, the result will enhance our ability to grow our City in ways we cannot even imagine. Yes, this will take financial investment, but it will also take the ability for all residents to believe in a brighter future.

While we deserve the best, we also know it comes with the reality of cost. I call on the School Committee to take a hard look at current operational expenses and consider consolidation of certain services and departments internally or with existing City departments. The reality is that residents will not accept a new high school with the entire local cost shouldered by the tax payer, nor should they. We must all do our share to help offset the costs. While we need to embrace excellence, we also must embrace reality and work towards a shared funding solution.

No matter how we grow, unless we control spending, we will never truly evolve. We must conserve our limited resources and apply them to the best possible uses; in ways that will generate the best possible return for our current and future residents. This may be hard, but it's important to look not at just singular line item expenditures, but rather the way we do business that puts the most burden on the tax payer.

It feels good to add more parks, more programs, more events, more government services, etc. But is it worth it? I suggest we embrace a policy of quality over quantity. Let's start by focusing on how the City can support community-driven events. Let government be the facilitator versus the creator. By that, I mean let's ensure that our residents have the opportunity to create and to lead. This will start us on the road of quality over quantity.

And Residents, if we are going to keep moving forward, we need YOU to be more involved than ever before. Do you have an idea for beautifying your neighborhood? Let us know! Have a pothole that is dangerous, go to our website and "Report it." See a new business open? Stop in and say hi, maybe even buy something. Want to create a neighborhood event? Give us a call so we can support your efforts.

I challenge you to BE the leaders, be the spark, and leave Auburn better than you found it.

After all we are a city of connections. I dare say we just might be the most connected City in New England. We connect with each other through our neighborhoods, coffee houses, recreation, diners, and breweries. We connect with nature through our trail systems, lakes and rivers. We connect our industry with the world through our intermodal facility, airport, interstate access, and city-wide broadband internet. And we feel the effects of connection through tragedy and how we come together to help one another in a time of need. We connect with each other when we celebrate greatness in individuals and to encourage success in everything we do.

By utilizing these connections, I have no doubt that we will be the greatest small City in New England and will well-positioned for another 150 years of success.

Thank you for your time and for allowing me to serve the community that I love. I look forward to working with all of you over the next year to embrace and truly live up to our moto:

**"No Backward Steps."**