



## Auburn Mayor Jason J. Levesque | **State of the City Address 2023**

Good evening, residents of the City of Auburn. As your Mayor, it's important to periodically share with you the state of our great city. To summarize the previous year, and to give you a vision of what is to come. To share with you the good - and the not-so-good - in a truthful and succinct fashion.

During this bi-annual State of the City address, I am beyond proud to report that – like the people who live here - the state of our city is **STRONG!**

Through hard work, vigorous public debate, and with a focus on execution, the City Council, Planning Board, and city staff – under the leadership of City Manager Phil Crowell and Assistant City Manager Brian Wood - have passed some of the nation's most meaningful zoning reform packages, designed to empower the individual, right generational wrongs, and foster an environment of success.

Zoning reform alone could not have altered our future. But when you combine it with massive governmental reforms, elimination of 40% of our permitting fees and corresponding regulations, streamlining service delivery, creating financial incentives to rehabilitate our most vulnerable neighborhoods, developing grants that help pay for home efficiency upgrades, the building of accessory dwelling units on your land, grants to promote neighborhood stores, youth recreational opportunities sponsored by area non-profits, small business loan pools, and so much more...the transformation can and will be life-changing for our city.

Just last year, the City of Auburn permitted a record setting \$73 million in projects, and we are on the verge of unleashing hundreds of millions of dollars in new value, making Auburn's future, and yours, that much brighter.

But we don't have to wait to see the results these reforms are making. We can see them everyday throughout our city. We see the beautiful new Barnies Basketball Courts in the Gully; the ones that sit beside our brand new Futsol court. We see new playgrounds built around our city, including Maine's largest ADA-accessible playground at Lake Grove Park. We see construction crews throughout Auburn crafting and rehabilitating a new

generation of housing. We see a resurgence in community pride, brought to life at some of Maine's BEST festivals; signature events such as New Year's Auburn, which recently drew over 5,000 people to the heart of our downtown, and our upcoming "May is for Mainers" Auburn Lobster Festival coming up on May 6.

We see decreasing crime rates and growing career and educational opportunities for all our citizens at some of the most innovative companies in the world. From Thomas Moser cabinet makers to Future Guard, employing some of the most talented craftspeople in Maine, to Proctor and Gamble, Auburn Manufacturing, Strainrite, and so many more that are creating new technology that is changing the way our country innovates.

Simply travel through our great city and you will see new retail and commercial stores opening, housing developments rising, and our manufacturing businesses continuing to invest in Auburn. We have high paying jobs and an enviable location within Maine, and as a result, we have seen a truly amazing increase in people wanting to move here, making Auburn what realtor.com calls, "The 10<sup>th</sup> hottest real estate market in the country in 2022." IN. THE. COUNTRY!

Auburn has been profiled in news articles across the US; pointed to as an example of how to re-invigorate a stagnant community. And though we might not always see or hear it, folks from all over know us, envy us, and want to be like us.

When we look at our current and future success, we must include the work of the Auburn School Committee and staff. We are just months away from opening an incredible new state-of-the-art high school, and the hours, focus and determination shown by all involved is mind boggling to say the least. We have also worked together with our partners at Central Maine Community College to provide early college access for our high schoolers, allowing them to explore new careers in the trades, and get a jump start on entering the local career market, making our students and our city stronger in the process. When you look at how our educational proficiency scores have defied the state and national trends and improved an average of 30% at the same time as a new school is being constructed, and these new programming options are being rolled out well, you simply have to say, "thank you."

Under the leadership of Chair Karen Mathieu and Superintendent Dr. Connie Brown, the Auburn School Committee has made many operational reforms, working with the city to create best-in-class service and economy of scale, valuing every tax dollar entrusted to them, and making difficult decisions that have and will continue to prepare our youth for the careers that exist here now and in the future.

The State of our City – and the people here - is not only STRONG, but resolute. We will face challenges that could, if not attended to, derail what we have worked on over the last five years, pushing Auburn back to a time when we were weaker, poorer, and the future was less bright than it is today.

This year, we will be faced with the most challenging budget since the recession of 2009. Inflation is impacting the cost of government, just like it's taking a toll on you and your family. The massive desire for so many people to live in Auburn is, on one hand, exciting. On the other hand, it is causing steep increases in home values and property taxes and a shortage of housing of all kinds.

These significant issues have brought Auburn to a decision point. If we are to continue to be a city, with city-style services and amenities, how do we pay for them? The options are clear. We either raise taxes, increase our taxable value, or we cut services. And cuts to things like EMS, police, fire, education...those cuts have a lasting and resounding effect on the future health of our community.

The city council and I have chosen to grow our base; to increase taxable value through the growth of market rate housing, commercial and retail enterprises, and investment into innovative policies that will decrease the cost of existing housing, while allowing more attainable housing to be built, especially for young families and seniors.

For too long, our regressive zoning policies have stifled home construction, and forced growing families to other towns, increasing their commute time, decreasing our tax base, and denying our community with our most valuable resource...people. This was done based on many false notions, one of the most horrendous of these is that "kids are bad," that they are costly and don't add value. That can't be farther from the truth.

In fact, I am going to propose for consideration by the council a series of investments into childcare partnerships that will increase the amount of affordable childcare openings within the city, allowing families to not have to choose work over having children. Yes, we need more kids! Our schools can handle an increase of over 300 within our current capacity. It's time we maximize the return on our educational investments and encourage families to move to grow and stay within the city that they love...Auburn.

To further accelerate our response to the housing crisis, I will introduce a directive from the city council that staff will present a plan to acquire - through eminent domain - corporate owned, derelict, and undeveloped land and properties by May 1. We can no longer sit by while corporations practice speculative land monopolies and refuse to address crumbling buildings. We must face this head on and act in the public interest.

I will ask the city council to join me in encouraging the Auburn Housing Authority board of Directors to fulfill their mission statement and take immediate action towards the creation of additional owner-occupied family housing within Auburn. Creating this

option will allow people to become home owners, build vibrant neighborhoods of hard working people, and help us eliminate generational poverty within our city.

Next, I want the people to Auburn to know that the actions we have taken as a city to protect Lake Auburn are sound and, frankly, decades past due. Study after study and expert after expert have validated our policy initiatives and agree that there is no room for politics when it comes to protecting our drinking water. There is either right or wrong, and I am grateful to be on the side of right.

As we continued to negotiate and navigate zoning reforms, we are finally able to address the agriculture and resource protection zone. We have carved out over 4,400 acres surrounding Lake Auburn which will soon be a conservation district protecting this extraordinary natural resource, and providing responsible recreational access, such as fishing, hiking, and biking. It will be a true oasis within our city that shows how we can achieve a balance between natural resource protection and ecologically attentive home construction. This same thoughtful and focused approach, using the latest in research, will allow us to achieve similar goals in South Auburn. By removing an archaic and discriminatory income standard and replacing it with ordinances specifically designed to limit mass development and identify and protect natural resources we can achieve what so many communities have failed to do. A true balance between humans and the natural world.

Understand that not everyone will like our initiatives. Everyone wants progress, but very few actually want change. There will continue to be letters to the editor, ill-informed attacks on social media, and lies and rumors spread at the grocery store. These are all designed to divide, inflame tensions, and keep the status quo. Or worse yet, take us backward to a time not that far in the past when, power and wealth were concentrated with the few to the detriment of the many.

We need your help. You can help by spreading the word about policy initiatives, grant opportunities and our city's successes and challenges.

This city council, along with our talented and dedicated staff, and with your help, will continue to face challenges head on, navigate change and growth, and together, we will all continue to embrace our city's motto of "No Steps Backward."

Thank you and good evening.

