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## Text of the State of the City address by Mayor Gary Herzig | Local News

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The following is the prepared text of Mayor Gary Herzig's State of the City address, delivered March 1:

This past year has been a challenging one for Oneonta — we have had transitions in leadership, a tax cap that leaves us virtually flat funded, a reduced workforce, and an infrastructure of roads, water, and sewer systems that are showing their age. Despite these challenges — as you have seen — our city team, led by acting City Manager Meg Hungerford, has made considerable advances in improving efficiencies, our quality of life, and our infrastructure. So, to Meg and the entire team, I say, "Thank you."

Of particular importance are the innovations on this list.

We now have a GIS system for the city's infrastructure. This is the work and vision of City Engineer Greg Mattice. Thank you, Greg.

We have a new creative GPS system for OPT buses thanks to work of Transportation Director Paul Patterson. Thank you, Paul.

And I commend Chief Naylor on his purchase of body cameras to equip our entire force. A move that will certainly help in maintaining a trusting relationship between the police and the people of this city. Thank you, Chief.

With a virtual tax freeze, the city has had to take numerous actions to maintain our essential services, and our quality of life. We have seriously reduced the size of our workforce, reformulated our employee benefits, reconsidered the delivery of some services, and we have looked to reinvent our relationships with our neighbors in the town and the county. And by doing so, we have been successful in weaning ourselves off of spending our reserves in order to balance our budget. This is a very significant accomplishment.

First up in 2016 will be the completion of a review, I commissioned, of our four-year-old City Charter. I believe we would be foolish not to try and learn from our experiences of the past few years. I believe that the committee's recommendations will clarify and strengthen the role of the city manager and better define the relationship of the city manager and the mayor.

The committee will be presenting its recommendations this month and it is my hope the Council will act quickly so that the selection of a permanent city manager can begin shortly thereafter. And, we will continue, as we have the past six months to have the city's day to day operation overseen by the city manager, leaving the mayor and the Council to establish policy and set direction for the city's future.

As we move forward, my priorities will include better housing, economic development, increasing revenue, and updating our aging infrastructure. It is important to recognize that progress in these crucial areas cannot be made by the city working alone. So my focus will be on engaging our neighbors in the town and in the county; our business community; our colleges; our not-for-profits, the state, and our county IDA.

Several years ago, Mayor Miller convened a "Community Alliance" — an informal monthly meeting of area leaders. I will be reviving and expanding this initiative. We will formalize it and develop agendas important to the growth of the entire area because a healthy city of Oneonta is essential to a healthy town of Oneonta and healthy county of Otsego.

### HOUSING

This spring, in partnership with the Otsego County IDA, we will undertake a housing study. But even before we begin, we know that our City suffers from a lack of good housing for all income levels. We have a lack of affordable workforce housing, insufficient professional housing, and virtually no rental housing for families.

However, this week we will see 5 vacant abandoned buildings in our Center City demolished and contractors are already working on the abandoned eyesore on the corner of Spruce and Ford. This is the beginning of a \$15,000,000 project to create high quality affordable housing for 40 or more of our senior citizens and 20 of our working families. This project has been four years in the making and is the result of a partnership between the city of Oneonta, New York state, Housing Visions Inc., and private investors. This project will be good for our Oneonta families, good for our businesses, and good for our neighborhoods.

But unfortunately, this only represents, the tip of the iceberg when it comes to our housing problems.

We must also find ways to incentivize the development of quality housing if we hope to attract businesses and families to locate here. Recently, the Council created a program, through which anyone renovating a vacant sub-standard building into

rental apartments, can receive financial incentives from the city. The complete renovation of two abandoned properties is already underway — one on Chestnut Street and one on Main Street. We will look to continue and expand these types of incentives in our efforts to address our housing shortage.

When I talk with our major employers — Hartwick, SUNY, Fox Hospital, Springbrook — they all tell me that the lack of housing impacts their ability to attract new employees. So I will be saying to them, “Can we find a way to work together and create partnerships to build better housing together in Oneonta?”

We have a shortage of housing, yet we have some beautiful empty buildings. Bresee’s has shown us that there is a market for quality downtown housing and we are working with Chip Klugo to see that the Steven’s building is next. Let’s also look at our Armory building. Yes, there are obstacles — but that should not stop us from trying.

## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

By working in close partnership with the Otsego County IDA, a vision for a new Oneonta is starting to take shape. In the hillsides surrounding Oneonta, we are seeing an increasing number of small agricultural entrepreneurs producing organic vegetables, specialty crops, hops and more. Oneonta can and should be the center for this area’s growing craft food and beverage industry. Anchored by the Foothills Performing Arts Center, it is not hard to imagine Market Street as a hub for entertainment and hospitality, based upon the marketing of local foods and beverages.

Oneonta was originally built around the jobs produced in the D&H Railyards. Today we are looking to that same property to revive Oneonta’s economy. As a result of the development know-how of IDA Director Sandy Mathes and the confidence in this city shown by the IDA’s Board of Directors, we will be moving forward this year with a complete Environmental Impact and Engineering Study. This is a very important partnership, and I very much appreciate the IDA Board’s belief in the city of Oneonta and its willingness to invest in Oneonta’s future.

To make sure that these development initiatives are consistent with the vision of the citizens of Oneonta, we will begin an update to our Comprehensive Plan this Spring. We will seek the input of our residents, businesses, colleges, and other organizations in better defining the vision for a new Oneonta.

This past year, we have begun to reinvent the Oneonta Municipal Airport as a potential tool for future economic development. I want to thank our new volunteer Airport Commissioners for their vision and work — Ed May, Jeff Back, Dennis Finn and Len Carson. Thank you. We are building a new taxiway, looking to expand the apron, and, thanks to the hard work of the students of the Oneonta Job Corps, we now have a fully renovated terminal building.

The governor’s budget contains considerable aid to upstate airports this year and, just last week, I was notified by the governor’s office that they see Oneonta as a strong candidate. This, however, cannot be a go-it-alone project for the city. The airport is a potential engine for economic development for the region — including the county and the town, and we will need them to recognize this and step up to join us in investing in this asset. And let me point out that grants are not free — every grant requires a percentage of local matching funds that simply cannot be borne by the city alone.

Another priority area for the coming year must be looking for new sources of city revenue. With a tax cap that could be as low as .0015 percent, we cannot sustain increases in health insurance and cost-of-living allowances without new sources of revenue. We must make certain that the city is properly compensated for any services it provides. We also realize that we are not the only city in New York state facing this situation, so we will work together with other cities to share ideas and identify solutions. We are very fortunate that the city of Oneonta has healthy reserves; however, reserves will not last forever and without new revenue ideas, we can find ourselves with depleted reserves, as have some other cities in New York state.

And finally, we must prioritize taking care of our infrastructure of roads, water and sewer. We have pipes in the ground that are more than 100 years old. Our vision for a new Oneonta depends upon a reliable infrastructure. At a time when water quality across the nation is getting much attention, the residents of Oneonta are very fortunate to have safe drinking water that is carefully monitored and well maintained. And I want to thank our Water Treatment Plant Manager Stan Shaffer, both for his expertise and his diligence in making sure that Oneonta’s water is safe and healthy. But we need to work to secure funds to maintain and improve our water systems for the future, and this must be a priority.

When I first began my campaign last year, I said that Oneonta was at a fork in the road. More and more people are noticing us as a quality place to live and work. Our recent accomplishments include Foothills Performing Arts Center, Bresee’s, and now Housing Visions. Our progress and our vision are being noticed both in the Mohawk Valley and in Albany. Senator Schumer during his recent visit told me that he rarely visits a city with as strong a vision.

If we invest and act wisely, we can move forward to achieve that vision. If we don’t, our aging housing, infrastructure, and lack of good jobs will sink us. We must balance paying for what we need today with investing in our future. We, and our

neighbors in the county, must work together to do this. This past year, the city and town of Oneonta combined generated more than a half million dollars in bed tax through tourism. Money that, at least some of which, should be reinvested in our future. I believe it is very short sighted on the part of our county board, to neither distribute any of these funds to the municipalities that generated them, nor to show a plan for investing them in our future economic development.

As a result of the work and investment of many, the city of Oneonta has accomplished much in recent years. I would like to thank all those who have contributed - businesses, not-for-profits, civic organizations, individuals, and of course our city team. By pulling together, staying focused, and making good decisions, we can continue to build momentum. We have an excellent new Council and many dedicated volunteers. To all, I say, "Thank you" and ask that "keep your energy level high and keep your eyes on the prize – the prize being the future of the city of Oneonta." Thank you.