The State of the City of Ithaca is strong.

Five years ago our City was facing the worst fiscal crisis in living memory. Vacant storefronts downtown, stalled construction projects, no significant new housing had been built in decades, taxes were rising at over four percent each year and an annual operating deficit of over $3.5 million.

City employees, commission members, and you, the Common Council, made hard choices and smart investments to turn things around.

We changed the zoning to encourage more growth, invested in our infrastructure – rebuilding the Commons, completing the waterfront trail, rebuilding bridges and roads – streamlined our operations, and leaned on the creativity of our people.

In return we have seen our city become populated with outdoor murals that are the envy of every community in the country.

We’ve facilitated the development of hundreds of market rate housing units and affordable developments like Breckendridge, Stone Quarry and 210 Hancock.

Financially we’ve clawed our way back from the worst of the recession. So much so that in the last three years we’ve been able to increase our investment in infrastructure, public safety, and community building while still lowering the tax rate.

In 2017 the tax rate will drop by 6.6 percent – which means homeowners will pay the lowest tax rate since the year 2003.

And even though the online retailing is changing the commercial landscape - so much so that Countywide sales tax has declined by over two percent this year- our city is defying this national and local trend - - Citywide sales tax collections have increased 1.5 percent. I believe that is directly related to our public investments downtown and in collegetown.

In 2016 we continued to push. Presenting a public health and safety approach to drug policy that shifted the national conversation.   
Digitized our records to preserve our past into an electronic future. Ran a citizens police academy, created the officer next door program, and ran an implicit bias training for IPD officers – all to demonstrate that a new model of community policing can keep us all safe.

We fought for and won a grant that will allow us to hire four new fighfighters – increasing safety while saving hundreds of thousands of dollars each year.

All but entirely completed the largest ever investment in infrastructure in the City’s history - our water treatment plant – only site work remaining. And even though a record setting drought caused water quality issues – we’ve now completed lead testing in 60 random homes and everyone one of the 60 homes came back below the allowable limit for lead.

We’ve rebuilt the Lake Street Bridge adding a beautiful welcoming park, rebuilt Dryden Road, Tioga Street, Hector Street, Aurora Street, 7200 linear feet of sidewalk,  
All while settling contracts with the CSEA Admin and CSEA DPW, and are within striking distance on the Exec association.

The State of the City is strong. But we must brace to face a storm unlike any we’ve faced in recent memory – a federal government that is openly hostile to progressive governance.

In two weeks a new President will be inaugurated – a President who rode a wave of ethno-centric jingoism to the election. He received nearly 3 million fewer votes than his opponent, pledged to create an unconstitutional ban on muslims, demonstrated no knowledge of urban policy, intends to appoint a HUD Secretary with no experience in government, pledged to punish women who seek abortions, and has threatened to retaliate against cities like Ithaca – cities that have declared that they will not cooperate with federal attempts to round up and expel hard working law abiding immigrants.

So our challenge beginning in 2017 is to continue strengthening the City of Ithaca despite a hostile federal government. I believe we can do this if we do three things – protect the vulnerable in our midst, link arms with likeminded communities around the country, and prove that progressive governance leads to a high quality of life.

First - Protect the vulnerable

An overwhelming majority of Ithacans voted to make our country stronger together. Those Ithacans will not be represented in the White House, or in the halls of Congress. We must do what we can to give voice to their mandate.

I’ve tasked City Attorney Ari Lavine with a project we are calling the new Federalism – named for the principles outlined in the Federalist Papers and enshrined in the United States Constitution. A principle that holds that local and state governance can and should act as a check on federal excess.

We are preparing measures that will protect DACA students – students who have barely known any country but ours – from forcible deportation.

We are preparing to resist any efforts by the Justice Department to insist on racial profiling in policing.

We will resist any effort of the federal government to disregard the states’ ability to chart public health and safety approaches to drug policy.

We will work with our partners in the non-profit sector to protect New York State’s rights to guarauntee women their full reproductive rights

We will continue working with Ithaca Welcomes Refugees to bring refugees out of the nightmares of Syria and Iraq and into a new life of productivity, freedom and happiness.

And I am confident that those refugees will join the generations of American refugees and immigrants before them who have contributed so greatly to the quality of life in Ithaca.

I can promise you that my administration will be on the front lines, and I encourage you – the Common Council to continue raising your voices. You already have shown your willingness to fight.

So many of you know that I have been tolerant of, if not enthusiastic about, statements of principle on national issues being raised in these chambers. Now I believe that we must send a message with every opportunity that an agenda coming out of Washington DC based on alienation, and the removal of rights, will not be allowed to flourish.

Second - Link arms with like-minded communities

Ithaca is unique in many ways – but Ithacans are not alone in their fear of the new administration. Communities around the country and the world are preparing initiatives similar to those I’ve just described.

To be successful we must share best practices, and pool our resources to effectively lobby the federal government.

So in the coming year we will look for every opportunity to partner with cities both large and small. City Attorney Lavine and I have already met with Mayor Deblasio and a dozen other mayors of cities in new York state. I’ve joined the coalition – Cities of Action, I am on the executive board of the New York Conference of Mayors and will use my position with the US Conference of Mayors to share information, learn what other communities are doing, and rally the support of millions of Americans to our common cause.

Third - Prove that progressive governance leads to a better quality of life

And finally it us up to use to prove that progressive governance leads to a better quality of life. Kind words and good intentions will prove nothing. Sound governance that solves peoples problems will make our city a better place – and prove that progressive policies are worth supporting at the national level.

As Mayor Richard Daley of Chicago said, “Good Government is good politics”

So we must solve the largest problems We must continue to make housing more affordable, invest in our infrastructure, make quality of life improvements in every neighborhood – not just downtown and collegetown.

First is housing quality and affordability –

This year the planning department along with the planning committee will create a new Housing Strategy

- Build more housing – focusing on middle income housing. Our efforts to build market rate and affordable housing have paid off, the middle of the housing market continues to suffer. The only direct solution is to shepherd more homes into our community.

- Prevent housing discrimination. The recent housing summit illuminated how large an issue income discrimination has become in Ithaca. In 2017 the Planning Committee will discuss and propose to the Common Council possible solutions that will prevent landlords from turning tenants away solely because of their method of payment.

- To lower rents and lower taxes, we must reach a new deal with Cornell University for a higher contribution

o We’ve had some success on this front - our stormwater fee has already pulled hundreds of thousands of dollars of revenue from the University – and in 2017 we will explore more fees that will compel the University to pay their fair share

o We also successfully negotiated a commitment from the University to fully fund an $800,000 repair of Forest Home Drive

o But the first order of business with the new President must be their scandalously small investment in their community. Every single one of the university’s peer institutions contributes far more to their towns and we will insist that Cornell University meets their obligations.

Infrastructure investment

- Besides putting the final touches on the water treatment plant we will:

- Construct sedimentation ponds in the Southwest and begin dredging area waterways

- Redesign and rebuild the intersection of Spencer Street and Stone Quarry

- Repave Chestnut street, Hook Place, Willow Avenue, Cornell Street, West Lincoln Street, North Albany Street and rebuild the Cascadilla Creekway

Quality of life improvements neighborhood by neighborhood  
- Beginning a new Traffic calming initiative that will touch every ward in the City – so when constituents reach out to you with their heartfelt concerns about the safety of their children – you’ll have a mechanism to improve their neighborhoods.

- Our Planning department is hard at work on design standards for collegetown and downtown – so while we benefit from the increased population that dense development delivers – we can ensure that new buildsings are attractive and fit the character of our city

- Create a Southside Neighborhood plan

- Establish a Strategic Plan for City Facilities

- We will begin Cayuga Street improvements – improving the lighting and widening the sidewalk to ensure that the western edge of downtown benefits from the new life and vitality brought by projects like Seneca Way, REV and the Carey Building, The Marriot Hotel and others

- Similarly we will be working with Cornell to make improvements to College Avenue – the gateway to University that include tearing down the wall outside the Schwartz building to create a new public space

- And perhaps the most urgent priority neighborhood plan is already underway – the Waterfront Master Plan and Inlet Island. We have a committee of stakeholders creating a master vision – we are lobbying furiously for funding to remove the NYS DOT from our waterfront – and we will be preparing an RFP for redevelopment of city owned lots on Inlet Island.

- Those efforts will create economic opportunities – and we will ensure that our young people are first in line by continuing to provide and expand job training and placement through GIAC and the Youth Bureau

- We will continue saving lives and increasing health through a new approach to drug policy. We will do this for the man who wrote me today and said that he wants us to keep fighting because, ”I do not want to pick up with Ithaca Journal one day and find my daughters name in the obits, or any more of that people that I love and care about”

- Along those lines we will debut our lawn enforcement assisted diversion program this year, as well as our IPD Community Action Team and continue funding the Downtown Outreach Worker

- And though President Barack Obama is leaving office this month, his work will continue through the My Brother’s Keeper inititiative. A Program that seeks to improve the country by improving the life outcomes at every level for young men of color. Our City will have it’s first My Brother’s Keeper coordinator in Travis Brooks who will be working out of GIAC to lift those in need of a hand up.

We will do all this and more because :

The fight against fascism will be waged and won at the local level. Precisely because fascism relies on the inhumane treatment of others based on the smallest of differences. And while it possible to pretend that those a world away are not your worth human treatment. That they are not worth your care. Not worth your concern. - it is impossible to deny the humanity of your neighbor.

Local officials are closest to the people we serve – we look our neighbors in the eyes - we will be the bulwarks against inhumane repression of ethnic, religious and cultural minority communities.

We will fight – although the powers arrayed against us are indescribably large and scary. We will fight.

We will be a community that follows the lead of brave public servants like Officer Colin. Officer Colin only became an officer this year.

But his story – living for 7 of his 9 years on this planet with inoperable brain cancer – have inspired every Ithacan to give more and to do more. He has faced down fear, uncertainty, and discomfort – while equipped with nothing more than his desire to help other people.

We will fight like Colin fights, because there are so many people counting on the City of Ithaca to lead the way.