Good evening. I want to thank my friend and colleague, Barbara Jeter-Jackson for those warm and kind remarks. You don’t have to look any further than Barbara Jeter-Jackson, to see the finest example of what a public servant is.

I’ve been looking forward to speaking with you this evening because I’m more excited than ever about what’s going on in our Great City, the progress we’re making together, and particularly about what we’ve got planned for the coming year. Let me start by thanking Andrew Burgreen for hosting us here at the Cunneen Hackett Arts Center, this place is one of the City’s jewels and always so warm and inviting – thank you Andrew.

This building is such a wonderful reminder of all Matthew Vassar did for Poughkeepsie. A visionary who saw the potential for commerce along the Hudson, he knew how education, community and an improving quality of life would make Poughkeepsie a premiere place to live and work. He not only saw Poughkeepsie’s potential, he lived it in his daily life. He became an ambassador of our City and today, 200 years later, we have opportunities to tap into his vision once again.

We have with us tonight so many who make significant contributions to our community throughout the year. I know you can feel the same enthusiasm I do – coming from many different directions – there’s such a vibrant energy in the City of Poughkeepsie today and that energy drives us to work even harder to achieve tangible and measurable goals that will be the building blocks for our City’s future.

After two years as your Mayor – (which has just flown by!) – we are now at a point in our city’s fiscal recovery that we have long looked forward to – a point where we can turn our collective energy and more significant resources towards the things that matter most to our residents, businesses and taxpayers, and towards re-imagining Poughkeepsie as the vibrant hub of the Hudson Valley that it once was – and will be again.

How did we get here? Well, first – we met challenges head-on, by stabilizing the city’s budget, by starting to pay-down a general fund deficit which had ballooned over eight years, and then by prioritizing critical issues and resolving problems – not just by putting a band-aide on them as had been done for years, but by seeking-out real solutions for the long-term that make fiscal sense. We resolved long-standing collective bargaining disputes between management and labor. We integrated our City transit system into a stronger and more efficient county-system, we made critical repairs to key City infrastructure, including City Hall, where we repaired our leaking roof and replaced our failing heating system with two new high efficiency boilers. We began major rehabilitation work at our Financial Plaza parking deck in the heart of downtown, and we’ve made essential hiring decisions in the areas of finance, city planning and economic development – filling positions that had been vacant for years.

Some of these accomplishments played out in a very public way, like our transit consolidation with the County, our first bond-rating improvement since 2010, and the forward march of key development projects within the City. But many others happened without much fanfare, like our purchase of a new ladder truck for our Fire Department – a Million Dollar necessity we’ve finally achieved, partly with grant dollars supported by Assemblyman Frank Skartados; thank you Frank. We will also be taking delivery of our second group of five new police vehicles this spring, finally beginning the process of updating our police fleet by regular rotation.

Now in addition to the ladder truck I just mentioned, our Fire Department will soon take delivery of a new half-a-million dollar pumper truck – again, grant funded, which will replace the nearly- twenty year- old Engine Two which is at the Public Safety Building on Main Street, which by-the-way is the busiest in the City. These vital upgrades will ensure our first responders have the tools they need to do their job and they’re purchases which would not have been possible without the help of Senator Sue Serino, and Assemblyman Frank Skartados – thank you both for your strong support of our City.

As you know, public safety continues to be our strongest priority. When we provide our first responders with the equipment, the training, and the resources they need, they deliver for us, putting themselves in harm’s way every day. In 2017 our fire department responded to over forty-six hundred calls including nearly twenty-eight hundred calls for rescue and emergency medical aid. They were responsible for over forty life-saving actions and extinguished nearly fifty structure fires – 18 of which required multiple alarms. Their average response time this past year was an extraordinary 2 minutes and 14 seconds – three seconds faster than last year – and as everybody knows – in an emergency, every second counts…. Thank you Chief Mark Johnson, all our Firefighters and the staff of the 911 center for all you do.

When you elected me your Mayor, I promised to make the City safer – we’re doing that, and we’re going to continue doing that. This year our Police Department has led the way in the local fight against drugs and street crime, partnered with state and regional law enforcement on several significant investigations, one of which led to the arrest of 31 members of two gangs, and numerous other individuals who would target our residents and our community. Every day our PD continues its important work of strengthening community relations and building trust between our officers and the citizens they serve.

This past fall our Police Department launched a new program called the “BEAT-Patrol” – the Behavioral Evaluation Action Team. This team pairs a County trained mental health professional on patrol with a PD unit specially trained in Crisis Intervention. The program engages with our City’s at-risk population directly -right on the street, in an innovative plan to fit individuals with existing programs at the State or County level, such as the County’s new stabilization center on North Road, Mid-Hudson Regional Hospital, and other services that can help these individuals . This program has proven so successful, it is now being looked-at by other police departments for implementation in their jurisdictions.

We’re proud of this sort of innovation, because we know it’s time to try new approaches to problems that have persisted in our community for too long. In search of funding to support better outcomes, our PD sets an example for all our City Departments when it comes to grants application and management. Over the last two years we’ve received over $1.3 Million Dollars in grants for our police department – from money for Crisis Intervention Training (which continues to be a priority for us), to over $300,000 in State money awarded under the “Gun Involved Violence Elimination Program” – as well as funds from the Department of Homeland Security and other Federal agencies. I want to thank our State and Federal partners – this important funding is making a real difference in our City.

Now foremost in our minds is the violence occurring at schools in our country – words cannot express our sadness and horror at these events – but our actions can make them less likely. I have asked City Councilwoman and School District employee, Natasha Cherry, along with Councilmember Matt McNamara, our liaisons with the school district, to be part of the discussions with the City of Poughkeepsie School District’s “SAVE” team. I have asked Police Chief Tom Pape to work on additional school safety measures in conjunction with the District, and I want to thank Superintendent Nicole Williams, who is here tonight, and the School Board for all the assistance she and her team have provided to our police department as we respond to these unfortunate threats that have been made against the safety of our students – Together we can always do more – and we will.

As a 26-year veteran of the Town of Poughkeepsie’s Police Department, I can tell you no-one is more proud of the job the men and women of the City’s PD are doing, and I want to thank Chief Tom Pape – where’s Tom… for his leadership… Good work Chief.

While the numbers say crime in our City is declining – and it is – it’s time we face head-on the perception that still exists that the City of Poughkeepsie can sometimes be viewed as unsafe. The year-over-year statistics only tell what is actually happening on the streets of our City, and while crime is trending downward statistics can’t tell us what people think about our City – …changing public perception is difficult but that’s the goal we’ve set for ourselves as we turn to our plan for the coming year. As we think about what we must do in order to achieve this goal, we know cleaning-up our City is high on the list.

CLEANING UP OUR CITY

Now we will make the most significant investment in the cleanliness of our City in many years. We have committed to providing our Department of Public Works the resources and staff it needs to be successful throughout our entire city – every day. This month we are rolling-out our DPW restructuring plan which repositions staff, adds new positions, and makes a number of well-deserved promotions. This restructuring will allow us to field a weekend DPW team to clean our parks and to respond to specific garbage and debris accumulation that occurs mainly on the weekends. I want to be clear about two things: First, we added these positions at DPW while staying under the tax cap, and second: that the years of our hard-working DPW teams spending the first few days of every week playing catch-up are over.

This year we’re purchasing a new sanitation truck – that’s a first in a long while – and we’re going to strengthen our commitment to recycling in our City. Because it’s the responsibility of all of us to be better stewards of our environment. I want to thank two members of our recycling team who are here tonight: Chippy and Paul Dubois. Chippy and Pauly, as they are known, have been with the City for more than thirty years – together they’re part of the team which handles over 1000 tons of recycling each year – we thank them for their service to our community and the important work they do.

While I’m talking about our Department of Public Works, let’s acknowledge the fine job they’ve all done this winter – where is Commissioner Gent? – Great Job to you Chris and to your whole team. This has been a winter of slow-moving back-to-back storms that caused a lot of tree damage and downed power-lines. I know utilities don’t always get a mention in a State-of-the-City address, but I want to thank Central Hudson for their work in our City over the last month.

Some of our residents had a particularly challenging winter. The fire at the Rip Van Winkle Apartments this past fall and the subsequent heating problems took a real toll on families. I want to thank Councilman Chris Petsas for his tireless advocacy on behalf of the residents of his Ward. There is broad agreement that we must hold our landlords to a high standard. I also want to thank the Red Cross of the Hudson Valley, their response was swift and appreciated by everyone in our community. Thank you as well to the Civic Center, and Danielle Anderson and her team, for offering their space as a shelter for those in need, to all the many local businesses and non-profits that donated food, supplies and manpower to this effort. This could not have been accomplished without the help and coordination of the Dutchess County’s Emergency Management team – it was a tremendous response that kept us all focused on why we’re in public service in the first place.

Our City, like so many others, faces an uphill battle against blight. Vacant and abandoned buildings are not just a problem limited to certain blocks, you see them throughout the City. We know they can be hotbeds for criminal activity and other quality of life issues in our neighborhoods. We know they drag down property values. They lower our tax base and cost us valuable resources each and every year as we must repeatedly board them up, shovel their walks and mow their lawns. In the next few days I will be announcing the creation of an Anti-Blight Task Force which will harness and combine the power of various city departments, outside experts, and potential investors. A new Code Enforcement Officer will be assigned specifically to this anti-blight effort, and our Corporation Counsel, Paul Ackermann, will direct a team of city lawyers to increase enforcement of laws already on the books that apply to these so-called “Zombie Properties”. We know that efforts at the department level alone cannot have the impact we need, and so I have asked our City Administrator, Marc Nelson, to lead this task force, and to report quarterly on its activities, along with its successes, and challenges.

We also know that addressing blight must include proactive steps as well. Ensuring that residents are able to remain in their homes and promoting homeownership are keys to stabilizing neighborhoods and stopping blight before it takes root. That’s why we’re so excited to partner with the Poughkeepsie Affordable Housing Coalition. The Coalition is comprised of our local housing-focused non-profits – including Hudson River Housing, Rebuilding Together and Habitat for Humanity. We are teaming-up to ensure accessibility to long-term affordable housing and to decrease the number of vacant and abandoned properties in our City, particularly in the 5th ward. I know that our administration and our colleagues on the Common Council, especially Councilwoman Yvonne Flowers of the 5th ward, are committed to working with our housing advocates to build strong and vibrant neighborhoods throughout the City. As I’ve heard my friend Maureen Lashlee, the Executive Director of Habitat for Humanity say, “Together we are better” – and that is a true statement.

We don’t have to look far to see things that need to be done – but I want to talk with you about our parks. Our parks are our most precious resource for our residents – they’re in every part and neighborhood of our City. What’s a city without parks? From the top of College Hill, to the ball fields and pool at Spratt Park, to the great gathering place at Mansion Square, to Waryas and Kaal Rock Park along the Hudson River, we have beautiful parks and we need to invest in them. So many people depend on them. This evening I’m proud to announce that I will ask our Common Council to authorize bonding of up to One Million Dollars for park improvements, including sidewalk and curbing repair and to repaint every crosswalk and center-line in our City.

Now we’re going to tie this request to a grant application we submitted just this month to the State of New York for up to $3.6 Million Dollars in pedestrian safety upgrades, which will fund the purchase of new pedestrian crossing lights, signage and curbing. All Work that is long-overdue. Competition for these large grants is fierce, and we know that cities with skin-in-the-game, and with demonstrated need, earn the biggest reward. Combined, this initiative will make up to $4.6 Million Dollars available for significant and highly visible improvements in our City.

These investments will make our city safer, cleaner, more walkable, more bike-able. They will enhance our open and green spaces which are so important to this City and the people that call it home – they will also be a catalyst for improving our image and attracting new residents and new businesses.

At the same time we’re taking these meaningful steps to improve pedestrian safety for our residents, we will be collaborating with the Dutchess County Transportation Council and working closely with the New York State Department of Transportation to start a long-needed conversation about our arterial highways, and we have started that conversation. These arterials divide our City and are fraught with issues, from traffic safety to street and sidewalk snow removal challenges. They’re really just freeways right through the center of the City of Poughkeepsie. It’s time we take a hard look at these arterials and the impact they have on the quality of life in the City.

I’ve spent a lot of time this evening talking about doing things – but we know we can’t always do things by ourselves. It takes partnerships. It takes Collaborations. It takes people like you who are invested in seeing this City move in the right direction – and, most importantly who want to be part of it. And just in case you don’t know it, you are all part of it because if you weren’t you wouldn’t be here – and I thank you for that, and for your partnership.

Speaking of partnerships, I want to thank the County Executive, Marcus Molinaro, and the County Legislature, and also the many staff throughout county government that have worked so closely with us throughout the year. Shared services and collaboration aren’t our enemy, they’re our friend, and the County’s shared services program is simply the best in the State. Partnerships and sharing responsibilities are important in everything we do in our lives, and I’m lucky to have as my partner someone who shares my love for the City of Poughkeepsie and that’s my wife, Lori. Thank you Lori.

Just a few days ago the County announced enhancements to its bus service within the City. After tremendous community outreach and listening to the concerns and needs of our residents, new service started on Saturday. This evening, I am pleased to announce the “Spring Free” transit pass program that, jointly with the County, will provide free bus passes for the months of April and May for all City of Poughkeepsie senior citizens and persons with disabilities. We will be working with County staff to reach out all across our city to do the best we can to introduce the new routes, and as part of that effort we encourage all of our seniors and disabled residents to enjoy unlimited travel this spring, not just within the City limits – but throughout the County as well.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

When we clean-up our City, when we attack blight in our neighborhoods, and when we make long-delayed improvements to our parks and city infrastructure, we not only increase our property values and improve our quality of life, but we become the City people want to invest in again. And we are witnessing an uptick in investment activity in the City. Over the last five years we’ve seen a 71 percent increase in single family home sales while average days on the market are down. We’ve seen a 30 percent increase in building permits over a four year period and the Planning Board has never been busier, with over 900 housing units and more than 130,000 commercial square feet either recently completed or in the development pipeline. In fact, it’s time we recognize the work being done by all our Boards and Commissions, from the Planning Board to the Zoning Board of Appeals – and from the Waterfront Advisory Committee to the Arts Commission – all of the City’s boards and commissions are volunteer, and I want to thank their members, many of whom are here tonight, for all they do. And I also want to give special thanks and recognition to all of our non-profit partners here in the City – these organizations do so much for so many that government either can’t do, or just can’t do effectively.

So as we see renewed interest in the Queen City, it’s vital that we set the important goal this year of updating zoning regulations in key areas of the city. In the coming months we will release a new policy framework and zoning regulations for what we’re calling the “Poughkeepsie Innovation District”. The Poughkeepsie Innovation District is at the heart of Dutchess County’s recently announced “Innovation Quad”, a collaboration among our anchor institutions and businesses including IBM, Dutchess Community College, Marist College and Vassar College. And I want to thank those institutions, many of which are here tonight, for their commitment to the City of Poughkeepsie.

One of the key goals of the Innovation District is to support small business and job development, particularly in creative fields and light industry, while fostering partnerships with our local academic institutions to begin to address the skills and training-gap. We want to ensure that as Poughkeepsie develops, it happens in an inclusive and equitable way.

We also will continue to focus on the growth and prosperity of our existing businesses, and we are excited that Rhinebeck Bank – headquartered right here in the City of Poughkeepsie – is committing up to $3 Million Dollars in new small business loans within the City. I want to thank Mike Quinn, President of Rhinebeck Bank for this initiative – it’s just one more example of how important our community is – how important you all are – to our City’s future.

We are also focused on growing our planning and economic development staff- capacity. Last year we were awarded up to $1 Million Dollars by the State’s Financial Restructuring Board to invest in Economic Development and in our parking infrastructure and in the coming days I will be announcing the appointment of an interim Development Director. Just over the last several months we’ve hired a Senior City Planner, Natalie Quinn – filling a long-vacant position just at the right time. Natalie’s experience and qualifications are already having a huge impact on important work before our City’s Planning Board, and she has already become an important resource for our community and for those looking to invest here. We’ve also hired a new Social Development Director, Jackie Greenwald, whose role in community outreach and programs is going to allow us to do more for our youth, and to refresh and rejuvenate our Community Development Block Grant Program, a federal grants program that awards more than Three Quarters of a Million Dollars a year to the City and its non-profits, and this year we’ve more than doubled funding for youth sports activities in the City.

A recent survey found that a majority of respondents believe that Poughkeepsie’s best days are still to come. We do too. This evening we’re rolling-out a comprehensive new branding and marketing plan for our City’s future. We’re ready to send a strong message that our City is a thriving and on-the-GO City – we’re on the GO because of the people who live here, the families who have lived here for generations, and because of the fabric and history of our community. This City – Our City – IS a City on the GO.

Matthew Vassar was an ambassador for our city 200 years ago. Today, we all have the same responsibility to fill that role. As you hear more in the coming weeks about our new marketing plan, our innovative anti-blight campaign, our plan to upgrade our parks system, our efforts to upgrade equipment and repair aging infrastructure; when you see our new sanitation truck out on the streets, or our new fire trucks and new police cars in your neighborhoods – when you meet any one of the hundreds of dedicated and committed city employees in the performance of their work – remember that we are all champions of our City’s future and, we all have a role to play in the pursuit of these goals.

When we keep working together in our City – a city on the go – I know that we will accomplish all this and more. So tomorrow, join me in this adventure… This is Our Time – PK.GO!