

2026 State of the City Address

Common Council Members, friends, neighbors, ladies and gentlemen - thank you for being here this evening.

As we gather tonight, I am proud to say that Hornell continues to move forward with purpose, confidence, and momentum. Over the past eight years, our city has made remarkable progress revitalizing neighborhoods, strengthening public services, and fostering economic growth. From major infrastructure investments and downtown improvements to reinvesting in our parks, people, and departments, Hornell's resurgence is no accident. It is the result of careful planning, teamwork, and an unwavering commitment to doing what's right for our residents.

Hornell isn't just moving forward - we're gaining speed!

Hornell continues to be a regional leader in growth and affordability and remains one of the most affordable communities in all of New York State. Our fiscal outlook remains strong. The City's annual audit was completed and presented to the Common Council, once again highlighting a healthy and responsible fund balance. This strong financial position allows us to invest in essential services, maintain infrastructure, and pursue transformative projects—while remaining mindful of the burden on taxpayers.

Working closely with City Chamberlain Michele Smith, our department heads, and the Finance Committee, my administration continues to deliver responsible budgets that balance fiscal discipline with service delivery. Michele's tireless work behind the scenes ensures Hornell remains on sound financial footing, and I want to once again publicly thank her for her dedication.

Hornell's success is being recognized far beyond our city limits. This past year, Hornell was featured in a multi-page spread in *Business View Magazine*, highlighting our revitalization efforts, economic growth, and long-term vision. Additionally, the City received the Transportation Project of the Year Award from the American Public Works Association for our Downtown Revitalization Initiative streetscape and public art projects. This national recognition reinforces what we already know: Hornell is doing big things the right way.

An important step we took this year was the Common Council's passage of meaningful legislation establishing tiered property tax exemptions for seniors. This action recognizes that many older residents are living on fixed incomes and face increasing financial pressures as costs continue to rise. By creating a tiered structure, the legislation ensures that relief is targeted and fair, providing greater assistance to those who need it most while maintaining fiscal responsibility. It reflects our shared commitment to honoring the contributions seniors have made to our community and helping them remain in the neighborhoods they helped build. This is thoughtful, compassionate policy that puts people first and strengthens Hornell as a place where residents can age with dignity and security.

One of the things that truly sets Hornell apart is the sense of community we build through the events we host throughout the year. From the Thursday night summer concert series at Union Square Park, to the annual Independence Day parade and celebration at Veterans Memorial Park, these gatherings bring neighbors together and showcase the pride we have in our city. This year, we were also proud to welcome the Mustang Rally of the Finger Lakes to its new home at Veterans Memorial Park, adding another exciting tradition to Hornell's calendar. As the seasons change, the Maple City Fall Festival, Hornell for the Holidays, including the Christmas parade and tree lighting, and the 3rd Annual Christmas at the Square at Union Square Park continue to create opportunities for families, friends, and visitors to come together. These events are made possible through the strong partnership and collaboration between the City of Hornell and Hornell Partners for Growth, and they do more than entertain, they strengthen community ties, support local businesses, and attract people to our city year-round.

This past year also brought encouraging signs of growth and investment in Hornell, with several new and returning businesses choosing to call our city home. We were proud to welcome Forever Young Fitness, which is helping promote health and wellness in our community, as well as Bonatrans, a manufacturing company that established its business offices here, reinforcing Hornell's role as a place where industry and opportunity can grow. We were also pleased to welcome back a familiar favorite with the return of Pizza Hut, a sign of renewed confidence in our local economy. Looking ahead, we are excited for the upcoming opening of Real Clean Car Wash Express, another addition that will provide services, jobs, and further momentum for continued economic development in the City of Hornell.

Under the leadership of Executive Director Mike Nisbet, the Hornell Industrial Development Agency continues to be a driving force in our progress. The IDA is actively involved in revitalizing the historic Tuttle and Rockwell building and advancing a new single-family housing neighborhood off from West Street. The IDA also continues its work on the new City Street connection from Route 36 to the Shawmut Industrial Park, a project that will unlock the park's full potential while reducing heavy truck traffic in the First Ward.

Private investment tied to the Downtown Revitalization Initiative continued to gain momentum throughout 2025, with progress made on multiple projects that are strengthening and modernizing our downtown. At 11 Allen Street, the former Courthouse now home to Catholic Charities, façade repairs and painting were completed, along with new HVAC installation and improved steps and an accessibility ramp. Improvements were also completed at 17 Broadway, where The Warehouse added a new privacy fence along the alley, and at 17 Seneca Street, where the Burdett Building saw major façade restoration, upgraded business entrances, the creation of a new first-floor commercial space, and second-floor renovations resulting in five new apartments. At 200–204 Main Street, an ESD-supported project, added an additional apartment, further expanding downtown housing options. Several additional DRI-related projects are now underway through the Small Grant Fund and are scheduled to be completed in 2026, including porch and façade repairs at 11 Genesee Street, first-floor façade, window, and door renovations at 134 Main Street, and much-needed soffit and flashing repairs at the

Spotlight Theater at 191 Main Street, along with an expanded lobby and food preparation area. Nearing completion is the Church Street Suites project at 24 Church Street, where a full gut renovation has created six new short-stay units, and at 138 Main Street, improvements include façade painting, a new side entrance, and replacement of first-floor commercial windows. Together, these projects represent meaningful, building-by-building progress that continues to transform Hornell's downtown and reinforce long-term investment in our community.

As economic development remains a top priority in the Maple City, we continue to build on recent momentum with business growth, private investment, and job creation. Alstom's Hornell facilities remain a cornerstone of our local economy, supporting hundreds of good-paying jobs and positioning Hornell as a leader in rail manufacturing for years to come.

Construction and infrastructure investment remain hallmarks of our progress. The Department of Public Works, led by Superintendent Mitch Cornish and Foreman Rob Guy, completed another major paving season, resurfacing 13 city streets.

Through our partnership with BOCES, the City completed the new carpenter shop near Shawmut Park, ensuring DPW has the facilities it needs for decades to come. We also continue to invest in equipment, including a new "Vactor" sewer truck with vacuum and jetting capabilities, a new salt truck that arrived just in time for winter, and ongoing upgrades to our fleet.

At the Water Pollution Control Plant, work continues on the \$6.5 million Phase 1B upgrade project, replacing 50-year-old raw sewage pumps and modernizing plant ventilation and access systems. We also installed a new emergency generator capable of powering the entire facility during outages, ensuring uninterrupted service during emergencies. The City was also awarded a \$50,000 engineering planning grant to study sustainable biosolid management and PFAS levels, positioning Hornell for long-term environmental compliance.

Our water and sewer professionals continue to shine. Congratulations to Joe Brungard and Caleb Mitchell on earning their 1A operator licenses at the Water Filtration Plant, and to Josh Scialpa for achieving a 3A certification at the WPCP. We are incredibly fortunate to have Chief Operators Lenny Fucci and Rich Dunning leading these critical operations.

Housing remains a cornerstone of our revitalization strategy. Through our highly successful BOCES partnership, the City completed the 13th home and is nearing completion of the 14th house on Canisteo Street. The Land Bank continues to play an important role. As a Board member, I have consistently and successfully advocated on Hornell's behalf and will continue to do so, including advancing initiatives such as the planned rehabilitation of the property at 8 O'Connor Avenue, turning blight into opportunity.

Our parks continue to be a source of pride and activity. Union Square Park remains a hub year-round, and Veterans Memorial Park continues to serve families of all ages. At Shawmut Park, the City was awarded over \$530,000 from the State for a skatepark expansion, including the

addition of a pump track that can be used by bicycles, skateboards, scooters, and rollerblades alike. This exciting project is in the design phase with construction expected to begin next year. We also opened a new pocket playground on Bennett Street near the Little League Park, fully funded by the City and installed by DPW staff.

Public art continues to elevate our downtown. Highlights include *Atlas Shrugged*, a tree-inspired sculpture by Sam Castner at Union Square Park; *Tracks of Hornell*, a rail history installation designed with Hornell High School art students; and the stunning Pave Alley mural on the Lion's Will building. These projects were all funded through the City's DRI.

As previously reported, the City has secured important state funding for two major bridge infrastructure projects through the Bridge NY program, continuing our success in investing in safe and reliable transportation assets. We were awarded \$1.5 million to replace the aging box culvert carrying Canisteo Street over Spencer Run, addressing a long-standing infrastructure need and improving safety for motorists and pedestrians. In addition, the City received nearly \$3 million for the replacement of the Church Street Bridge, another critical crossing within our community. Planning for both projects is well underway, with 2026 anticipated to focus on design, engineering, and bidding, with construction expected to begin in 2027. These projects represent proactive investments in Hornell's infrastructure and demonstrate our continued success in competing for state funding to meet the needs of today while planning responsibly for the future.

When it became clear that critical portions of our regional sewer infrastructure—serving the City of Hornell, the Village of North Hornell, and the northern part of the Town of Hornellsville—were aging and in need of major investment, we chose cooperation over isolation. Recognizing the financial strain these challenges placed on our neighboring communities, I brought all three municipalities together to pursue a shared solution. Through this collaboration, we developed a unified approach to address deteriorating lines and underperforming pump stations, positioning ourselves to pursue multiple state and federal funding opportunities as one regional project. I am proud to report that this teamwork has already produced results, with the City recently being awarded a \$6.7 million IMG grant toward this effort. With the support of both the City and County IDAs, and under the guidance of our longtime engineering partner, LaBella Associates, this estimated \$16 million project continues to move forward, with additional grant applications actively being prepared for submission in the coming months. This initiative stands as a clear example of what can be accomplished when communities work together for the long-term health, sustainability, and prosperity of our region.

Through my administration's aggressive pursuit of grant funding, Hornell continues to punch above its weight. Over the past eight years, the City has secured more than **\$39 million dollars** in grant funding helping us invest in infrastructure, housing, parks, neighborhoods, and public safety while protecting our tax base. City Planner Heather Reynolds deserves special recognition for her outstanding work in this area.

With the continued work of Assessor Cindy Burdell, the City has administered two CDBG Neighborhood Revitalization grants totaling nearly \$1 million over the past eight years, helping qualified homeowners address critical needs such as heating systems, window replacements, and roofing repairs. This vital federal program has strengthened neighborhoods, preserved housing stock, and directly improved quality of life across the City. Building on that success, work funded through the most recent CDBG award is well underway and will continue this year, allowing the City to further invest in homeowners, stabilize neighborhoods, and sustain the positive momentum already achieved.

Despite ongoing challenges created by stringent CDL requirements and a nationwide driver shortage, Hornell Area Transit continues to rise to the occasion and deliver the reliable service our residents depend on. Deputy Mayor Jessica Cleveland and HAT Supervisor Kim Courtney remain focused on expanding ridership and strengthening the overall transit system. In support of that effort, HAT took delivery of two new buses in 2025, with an additional six buses currently on order. This ongoing investment in the fleet will ensure safer, more reliable, and more comfortable transportation for the community well into the future.

Our Codes Department continues to play a vital role across the City and responded to a record number of calls this past year. From inspecting businesses and residential properties to addressing blight and safety concerns, the department works every day to protect both residents and the integrity of our neighborhoods. Head Code Officer Bud Burdett and his team consistently go above and beyond, working directly with property owners to achieve compliance and, in many cases, stepping in to help residents navigate challenges that extend well beyond enforcement alone. At the same time, maintaining our community is a shared responsibility. Property owners and residents must do their part by preventing blight on their own properties, keeping lawns from becoming overgrown, and ensuring sidewalks are cleared of snow to keep everyone safe. In collaboration with Deputy Mayor Cleveland and City Attorney Tim Rosell, the department undertook a comprehensive review of the City Code. The recommended updates removed outdated and antiquated provisions so our regulations better reflect the needs of today's community and support a higher quality of life throughout the City.

Public safety remains in the forefront. This year, we welcomed Officer McCumiskey to the Hornell Police Department and added two new police vehicles, bringing the total to four new vehicles acquired through grants. The department also fully updated the city-wide camera system, added license plate readers, new dispatch workstations, and upgraded the safety glass in the lobby of the department.

Across New York State, a series of criminal justice reforms—well-intentioned in theory but driven more by ideology than by public safety—have led to serious and predictable consequences. Policies such as cashless bail, discovery reform, and Raise the Age have weakened accountability, restricted judicial discretion, and placed enormous strain on prosecutors and law enforcement. As a result, violent criminals and drug dealers are too often released back into our communities under cashless bail, even when judges believe they pose a clear risk to public safety. Repeat offenders cycle through the system, cases are dismissed over

technical deadlines rather than decided on their merits, and victims are left without justice. Serious crimes increasingly go unpunished, eroding public trust and diminishing quality of life for law-abiding residents. The cumulative impact has been rising crime, growing frustration among those sworn to protect the public, and a system that too often prioritizes process over safety. Residents deserve a justice system that balances fairness with accountability and compassion with common sense, one that puts community safety first. Unfortunately, there is little indication that Albany is willing to confront the real-world failures of these misguided policies. While outside forces continue to handcuff law enforcement and undermine public safety, my administration will continue to stand firmly with the Hornell Police Department, the Sheriff's Department, and all law enforcement agencies.

Our Fire Department continues to answer the call, responding to over 4,000 EMS and 400 fire calls last year. Engine 83, a brand-new pumper truck, is now fully in service, with another pumper scheduled to be delivered next year. We welcomed new firefighters Dale McMichael Jr. and Jordan Emo to the department, celebrated Mathew Donovan's achievement in becoming a certified paramedic, and congratulated Austin Wheatcraft on graduating from the Fire Academy.

As Chairman of NYCOM's Employee Relations and Public Safety Committee, I know firsthand that the growing EMS crisis across New York can no longer be ignored. Local governments are stretched thin, struggling to provide the emergency medical services that residents expect and deserve. A steady decline in volunteers, along with rising costs and burdensome regulatory requirements, has pushed EMS systems to the brink.

While we don't have an EMS crisis in Hornell, we are surrounded by one that puts stress on City resources. Tonight, I call on Governor Hochul and leaders in the State Senate and Assembly to act by enacting meaningful legislation and provide the financial support necessary to stabilize and strengthen EMS across the state. Public safety does not stop at police and fire; EMS is a critical front-line service, and we cannot allow our communities to bear the consequences of continued inaction.

I want to recognize our public safety leaders: Police Chief Ted Murray, Fire Chief Frank Brzozowski, Bud Burdett and so many others, who go above and beyond in service to our community. Their professionalism, compassion, and dedication define the spirit of Hornell.

Over the past several years, I have heard clearly and consistently from residents about growing concerns related to unsafe use of e-bikes in our community. In response, I have recently forwarded draft language for a local law regulating e-bikes to the Law & Ordinance Committee for review and consideration. I respectfully call on the Common Council to take up this issue and work toward reasonable, common-sense regulations that balance safety, accessibility, and quality of life. At the same time, I urge the Council to take a hard look at the City's restrictive residency requirement. In today's highly competitive environment, Hornell should not place limitations on itself that other municipalities do not. If we want to attract and retain the best talent to serve our residents, we must be willing to modernize policies that may no longer

reflect the realities of today's workforce, including considering expanding, or eliminating those restrictions altogether.

I continue to serve on NYCOM's Executive Committee, working closely with Executive Director Barbara VanEpps and my fellow mayors to advocate for municipalities across the state. Two years ago, we achieved a milestone not seen in 15 years by securing a long-overdue increase in unrestricted aid to cities and villages. While that funding, designated as "Temporary Municipal Assistance," provided welcome relief, it was not added to the base AIM funding, leaving local governments still facing budgetary pressure. Tonight, I renew my call to Governor Hochul and the state legislature to make this funding permanent and to ensure AIM funding grows annually to keep pace with inflation. The financial challenges of recent years have carried over, inflation and high interest rates continue to strain residents' finances and deplete savings, while local governments face higher costs for materials, equipment, and energy. I remain optimistic that conditions will improve, but the impacts of this economic strain are real and ongoing, and we must continue advocating for meaningful, lasting support from the state.

Transparency and clear, consistent communication remain core priorities of my administration. Through our City newsletter, regular website updates, timely press releases, and active use of social media platforms, we work to keep residents informed about decisions, initiatives, and issues that affect their daily lives. These tools not only provide timely and accurate information, but also create opportunities for residents to stay engaged and participate in the civic process. An informed community is a stronger community, and we remain committed to open communication that builds trust and encourages meaningful public involvement.

As our nation approaches the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, we are reminded that this country was founded not in ease or certainty, but in moments of division, challenge, and profound disagreement, yet guided by a shared belief in something greater than ourselves. Today, in an era marked by uncertainty, heightened partisanship, and constant noise designed to divide rather than unite, leadership matters more than ever. Here in Hornell, we continue to lead by example, focused on collaboration, respect, and results. While too many voices profit from outrage, and social media platforms reward conflict over common sense, my administration remains committed to rising above the fray and staying grounded in what truly matters: serving our residents with integrity, listening before reacting, and solving problems rather than stoking division. We may not control the national climate or the headlines of the day, but we can control how we govern, how we treat one another, and how we show up for our community. As we honor our shared history and look toward the future, let us choose cooperation over chaos and unity over fear. Hornell will continue to move forward - steady, proud, and united in both community and country. And to my colleagues on the Common Council, thank you for your partnership, professionalism, and shared commitment to this great city. Together, we will continue to move Hornell forward.

Thank you, God bless you, and God bless the City of Hornell.

Mayor John Buckley