

**Majority Leader Speech**  
**Kingston Common Council**  
**Reynolds J. Scott-Childress**  
**February 4, 2020**

The City of Kingston is heading toward a bright future. Over the past year, we have traveled far on a sometimes jarring road, but we always kept our eyes on the promising horizon. We can have faith in a prosperous future because of the many accomplishments we achieved in 2019.

Before continuing with my prepared remarks, I'd like to deeply thank the many former elected officials who are with us tonight. You cleared the way for our current successes. You have acted as trusted guides helping us find our way. Charlie Landi, for example, has been invaluable in helping me see what's most important in this journey. We don't always agree. But I respect the hell out of Charlie. I know he not only cares deeply for the City, but he puts in the *work*. Charlie shiningly exemplifies what the nation's founders called virtue. And we, the current members of the Common Council, are humbled to sit here before all of you tonight.

We the current members of the Common Council are proud of the great strides we took toward maintaining and improving City services in 2019. For example:

- Your elected officials
  - reduced your tax rates across the board for the fourth year in a row;
  - We achieved these reductions while improving City services.
  - We kept City spending at the same level it's been at for the past four years;
  - Kristin Wilson and Ruth-Ann Devitt-Frank are managing over \$30 million in major grants for infrastructure and quality of life improvements
  - We approved state funds for vital infrastructure projects such as the Hasbrouck CSO Sewer Separation Project.
  - Grants such as this have enabled us to undertake significant projects in Midtown such as improving the Henry and Franklin street corridors to make them safer and more accessible for local residents.
- Economic Development
  - The Kingston Land Bank is on the verge of opening its doors and so will be able to efficiently return delinquent properties to the tax rolls.
  - The City is attracting many new businesses and we are seeing fairly robust economic development that has contributed to our extremely low unemployment rate.
  - Using fund balance derived from sound fiscal management, we paid off the last of the NY State Retirement System amortizations that we were forced to borrow

in the wake of the Great Recession. This provides a huge savings to Kingston tax payers by avoiding future interest payments.

- We negotiated an equitable PILOT agreement with RUPCO to enable construction of much needed senior housing at the old Alms House site.
- Quality of Life
  - Julie Noble and DPW are leading the LED Lighting replacement project which will save the City hundreds of thousands of dollars per year and reduce the city's energy usage. Now 60 percent complete.]
  - We launched the Kingston311 reporting system so that residents can quickly inform City officials of hazardous conditions requiring repair. This was an initiative of the Common Council led by then 9<sup>th</sup> ward alderwoman Andrea Shaut—who has gone on to some other position. Anybody know whatever happened to her?
  - The Clerk's Department under Elisa Tinti has issued some 650 Municipal IDs.
  - We approved funds for numerous vital projects:
    - The desperately needed sidewalk along Route 32 from Washington Ave to Amy Kay Blvd for the many pedestrians who walk there.
    - Initial design work for renovating Andretta Pool and Dietz Stadium
    - Improvements at four City parks
    - Renovations at the Fireman's Museum.
  - The Forsyth Nature Center drew some 52,000 visitors from all across the northeast.
  - Parks and Rec
    - completed and opened a 9-hole Disc Golf Course at Kingston Point
    - Sponsored numerous social events, such as
      - the Earth Fair & Expo;
      - the 15<sup>th</sup> Annual Kayak Festival;
      - the 51<sup>st</sup> Annual Children's Day Parade;
      - the 17<sup>th</sup> Annual Fall Festival; and
      - Boo at the Zoo
    - And provided to over 3400 school age youth programming that included tennis and swimming lessons and a wide variety of environmental programs and activities
  - We reduced the redundancies of two bus systems and merged the City's with that of the County thereby reducing City costs and creating a more efficient system.
  - DPW laid down 12,000 tons of blacktop, more than twice the average annual amount. Paved 26 streets Washington Avenue to Foxhall, from Hurley Avenue to Wilbur. This is a significantly higher number than DPW originally projected and I would like to thank DPW Superintendent Ed Norman for the fine work his department is accomplishing.

And this is only a partial list of the City's 2019 accomplishments.

We're not stopping there. Just to mention a few major projects coming up in 2020:

- The NY State DOT has taken its first steps toward building a roundabout at the I-587-Broadway-Albany Avenue intersection.
- The Broadway Streetscape project, a wonderfully re-envisioned complete streets project, is now funded and underway.
- Ed Norman plans to keep up DPW's mad pace of laying down black top, projecting another year of way-above-average paving throughout the City.

This City does not run without its many dedicated employees and volunteers clearing the way.

This year I'd like to particularly thank Comptroller John Tuey and Assessor Dan Baker for their conscientious, diligent, and professional service. They have difficult jobs, planning the City budget, collecting taxes, managing finances, and appraising the value of property of many types throughout the City. They do so knowing that they must carefully hew to legal requirements and state oversight. They are what is right about City government: dedicated individuals who give the City their utmost effort.

I'd like to thank the many volunteers who have contributed their time, energy, and wisdom to the City's Boards and Commissions.

- We have more than twenty boards and commissions with over 150 Kingston residents who volunteer their time to serve. Several of these entities have vacancies that we need to fill. This is great time to get involved in City government. We are forward looking, our economic health is stellar, and all kinds of fascinating projects are coming our way.

For all the wonderful developments here in Kingston over the past year, we face significant challenges. Some of which will be extremely difficult to get through.

But as we search for direction and support, I think it is well to consider closely what our destination is. The recent wonderful opening celebrations of Black History Month organized by Harambee and the touching ecumenical celebration of Martin Luther King, Jr's birth last month at Pointe of Praise, have put me much in mind of the future where Dr. King directed his energies. He called it the "Beloved Community." He envisioned there a place characterized by basic standards of human decency, a will to reconciliation when disputes arise, and a commitment to justice and the type of love that "can transform opponents into friends." Dr. King was no starry-eyed optimist—no one who experienced the bombing of black churches by white supremacists, attacks by vicious police dogs, and savage beatings by vindictive Southern officials, could possibly ignore the stinging brutalities of illegitimate powers and the immense challenges they

erected in the path to justice. He was clear that finding a common direction in marching toward the beloved community would require much difficult work.

The power of King's activism was in his understanding that hating one's enemies was not only sinful: it was also bad strategy. And we have seen the ugly fruits of such bad strategy recently in Kingston. A former candidate for high office here in the city and former Mayor have unjustly accused the City's comptroller and assessor of corruption, of "cooking the books," and even fraud. Yet, they offered no proof other than their anger. We've also seen activists who claim they don't hate the police but attach the hashtag #FTP to their communications. They show no compassion for the frightfully difficult work our KPD officers face everyday—they seem unaware of cops' daunting stresses both on the street and in their personal lives. Police officers suffer from higher rates of suicide and divorce, and a shorter life span, than any other US occupation. These few activists blame KPD for every police involved incident anywhere in the US and thus condemn them without taking into account that our police force is more highly trained than most, has received only one complaint per year over the past two years, has not shot a firearm in the line of duty in five years, and has not fired a weapon resulting in death in over half a century.

Fortunately we have seen another way than recrimination and false accusation. Lester Strong, Drew Andrews, and some other empathetic and energized advocates have created here in Kingston the Peaceful Guardians program. Its aim is to bring together the City's police officers and struggling young people to help both populations help themselves and each other. It is a visionary program that flows directly through the channels of compassion laid down by Dr. King.

We on the council look to programs like the Peaceful Guardians and seek to follow the strategies of what King called "creative nonviolence," or what professional negotiators call "getting to yes."

The four basic negotiating principles of getting to yes are

1. Separate the people from the problem.
2. Focus on interests, not positions.
3. Invent options for mutual gain.
4. Insist on using objective criteria.

We will have to use these principles if we are to successfully navigate a number of daunting problems. Perhaps the biggest one facing us is housing.

I received the other day a heart-wrenching call from a tenant of a local apartment complex. She is 64 and lives with her 87 year old mother. She has lived in her apartment for over thirty years. In that time, the previous owners of the complex imposed no regular rent increases—and when they did raise the rent it was only by a small percentage. The current landlord is trying to gouge her with an outrageous increase. The tenant currently pays \$1293 monthly, but the owner is now

demanding \$1571. That's a 21.5 percent increase! Moreover, the tenant's lease doesn't expire until the end of March, but the landlord is demanding she renew by tomorrow, February 5, or face eviction.

Fortunately, we may soon have the power to fight such monstrous practices. If our current survey of properties eligible for rent stabilization regulations shows a "rent crisis," that is, a vacancy rate of under 5 percent or so in buildings of six or more units built before 1974, we can provide relief to tenants suffering unconscionable treatment from bad landlords. But we are aware that not all landlords act as the one noted above. Many care deeply about their tenants, work with them in times of stress, and desire long-term mutually beneficial relationships.

As we consider how to ensure decent housing for tenants, we will have to

- focus intently on problems such as rent gouging,
- work to balance different sets of interests,
- explore ways to create win-win outcomes, and then
- be sure to measure those outcomes to ensure that progress is real and not illusory.

But the crisis facing many of our tenants in large-scale apartment complexes is not the only significant housing issue we face. The crux of the matter is that the US does not have a reasonable system for housing our residents. We provide a public good through the mechanism of private property. This creates all kinds of tensions and imbalances.

The Common Council, working with the Mayor and involved Department heads, has already begun to deal with our housing needs. In the past year, we

- Sponsored a memorializing resolution in support of universal rent stabilization.
- Alerted the public to erroneous information being disseminated through a crooked push poll.
- Approved money for the vacancy survey mentioned earlier.
- Adopted a local law to allow senior homeowners with the 467 exemption to file late renewal applications—a crucial step toward enabling low-income seniors keep their homes.

We know there is much, way much more to do.

To this end our new Common Council President Andrea Shaut has taken the innovative step of creating a special subcommittee of the Common Council to proactively investigate the problems of housing, explore approaches tried elsewhere, develop innovative solutions, and to reach out to area experts in housing, folks such as Rashida Tyler, Guy Kempe, Joe Czajka— fellow travelers on the road to the beloved community.

As we chart our course we on the Common Council intend to be more proactive in blazing new directions for the City to take. We will endeavor to be as clear as possible about our process so

that the residents of the City can trust that we work for no one but them. We ask for your support and we ask for your patience as we work through the difficult problems that face us. We are a deliberative body: we will not be rushed through the process whether by an activist group or a mayor. We will set our own agenda in coordination with all who want to join us in venturing together toward a better Kingston.

Now I leave all of you here tonight with a challenge. Join us on the road to the beloved community. Show your best selves. Anger and vitriol only lead us into blind alleys. There's a bumper sticker that claims "If you're not outraged, you're not paying attention." It should read instead, "If you're outraged, you're not creating successful solutions."

The fine civic servants behind me are not perfect. Well, maybe Steve Schabot is. But they understand that the way to the beloved community does not turn through the howling wastes of spiteful division and ideological confrontation. They take instead the high road of neighbor helping neighbor, of seeking reconciliation, and of rising up to redemption.

In the challenges that face us, we must not point fingers. Rather, we must join hands even as we push through our disagreements, and pull ourselves along, and head on down the road getting to yes.