



## 2007 City of Wilkes-Barre Budget Address



**Thomas M. Leighton, Mayor**

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Good afternoon. Today, I am pleased to present the budget for the City of Wilkes-Barre's 2007 fiscal year, my fourth as mayor. My administration is confident that this budget will create a solid foundation for the coming fiscal year, reflecting our strong emphasis on public safety, participation in economic development projects and commitment to increasing the quality of life in our residential neighborhoods.

Through the cooperation of Wilkes-Barre City Council, my administration has been a key player in the renaissance of downtown Wilkes-Barre and the restoration of our city's neighborhoods.

Much has changed since last year's budget address, most notably, the completion of numerous projects like Northampton and Main, the Pennsylvania Labor and Industry Building, the reconstruction of the South Franklin and Waller Street Bridges and phase one of the Downtown Streetlight and Streetscape Enhancement Project.

Through collaboration with both public and private organizations, we will continue to attract new businesses to downtown, while maintaining positive relationships with long term tenants. With the opening of Wilkes-Barre Movies 14, Club Mardi Gras, the Barnes and Noble Collegiate Bookstore and other new businesses and restaurants, Wilkes-Barre is reestablishing itself as a city with an 18-hour downtown. In addition, the private sector is showing its confidence in Wilkes-Barre's future by investing in the city.

With these added amenities comes added responsibility for the City of Wilkes-Barre. In order for our city to succeed, those who patronize the downtown and reside in the neighborhoods must feel confident that they are safe on our streets. It is my administration's goal to build a strong, visible police force to protect the *entire* City of Wilkes-Barre. For this reason, public safety will once again be this administration's main priority for the 2007 fiscal year.

In the fall of 2005, eleven new police officers began patrolling Wilkes-Barre's streets. Recently, through Governor Rendell's *Police on Patrol* grant program, we received \$250,000 from the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency to fund the positions for five new officers. In the 2007 budget, I have appropriated over \$500,000 to fund additional police personnel. This investment, coupled with the changes in our budget from 2005, will enable us to hire a total of eleven new officers in early 2007.

The safety of our residents is always of utmost concern to my administration, as evidenced by the \$2 million investment in the fire department in 2006. This includes the

City of Wilkes-Barre's first new firehouse in over 20 years at Hollenback Park and the addition of three new fire engines and two new ambulances to the department's fleet. Fire Headquarters and the South Station are now both equipped with emergency electrical generators and all apparatus feature diesel emission control systems.

In addition to providing our brave members of the police and fire departments with superb equipment, we are actively working to increase safety in the city by reinvesting in the neighborhoods. Faced with the challenge of nuisance tenants and absentee landlords, our Community Action Team has become deeply involved in responding to concerns within our neighborhoods. Since its inception, CAT has inspected more than 500 properties and posted more than 50 unfit. In addition, we have removed over 32 blighted properties from city neighborhoods since I took office.

We have invested nearly \$800,000 in downtown streetscape enhancements in 2006 with the addition of new, historic streetlights. The South Franklin Street and Waller Street Bridges have been reconstructed and, over the next two years, the Barney and Regent Street Bridges will be completed. The damaged areas of the Laurel Run Creek Wall and Mill Creek have been repaired and the Govier Street Storm Sewer project was successfully completed. By the start of 2007, we will have paved over nine miles of roads throughout the city, including the main thoroughfares of George Avenue, Old River Road, Brown, Stanton, Academy and South Franklin Streets.

In 2007, more long term investments will be made in order to enhance the quality of life for our residents. We will continue to make repairs to infrastructure, including storm drains and catch basins that have been damaged after years of neglect. The five streams that run throughout the city will also be cleaned and maintained.

The City of Wilkes-Barre has been faced with three flood situations over the past three years. Each time, my administration has dealt with these potential disasters by implementing detailed response and recovery plans. Should this unfortunate situation occur again, we will be ready to act.

Despite its postponement due to the June flood events, there was outstanding attendance for the 2006 Bicentennial Celebration, displaying a renewed interest in the City of Wilkes-Barre. Hundreds of volunteers dedicated their energy and creativity for more than a year to ensure successful events. As a result, residents of the Wyoming Valley honored our rich heritage and bright future by celebrating with hope and excitement. Now, I urge everyone to continue this spirit of optimism into 2007.

Our success would not have been possible without the continued support of our members of City Council, Governor Edward G. Rendell, his staff and numerous state and federal officials, including Congressman Paul Kanjorski, Senators Rick Santorum, and Arlen Specter, State Senator Raphael Musto, State Representative Kevin Blaum and Luzerne County Chairman Commissioner Greg Skrepenak and Luzerne County Commissioner Todd Vonderheid.

As a result of this hard work and the cooperation of all city employees, the city's residents and numerous volunteers, my administration has reestablished and maintained the city's fiscal integrity. I am pleased to announce that I am once again proposing no new tax increases for the 2007 fiscal year.

The next year will bring more positive changes to the City of Wilkes-Barre. Construction has begun on the \$19 million Intermodal Transportation Center, a major step towards a new downtown Wilkes-Barre. This facility will consolidate bus and taxi traffic, as well as create additional parking for businesses around Public Square. Discussions between city officials and the Wilkes-Barre/Scranton Penguins to renovate the Ice-A-Rama have continued. This proposed project will include public skating and practice facilities for the Wilkes-Barre/Scranton Penguins.

Groundbreaking will take place very shortly for the riverfront development project. This complete restoration of the River Commons area of Wilkes-Barre will include a public gathering area suitable for festivals, an amphitheater and central hub for a fourteen-mile network of trails along the tops of levees. And, CityVest will continue its redevelopment of the Sterling Hotel, making it once again a grand entrance to the city that will include a mix of residential and commercial uses.

Seeing is believing in the City of Wilkes-Barre and, in 2007, my administration will keep giving everyone reasons to believe.