

Mayor Donchez: “The state of the City is strong. . . ‘The American Dream is thriving here’”

[The Bethlehem Gadfly](#) [City government](#) April 17, 2021

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[MAYOR DONCHEZ’S 2021 State of the city](#)

April 16, 2021

“One thing is certain – our future is very bright and Bethlehem will continue to be the jewel of the Lehigh Valley.”

Mayor Robert Donchez

*Sara K, Satullo, “Bethlehem development unfazed by pandemic as city saw \$305M in new construction in 2020.”
[lehighvalleylive.com](#), April 16, 2021.*

Christina Tatu, “In final State of the City address, Bethlehem Mayor Robert Donchez recounts year upended by pandemic.” [Morning Call](#), April 16, 2021.

Mayor Robert Donchez gave his **final “State of the City” address** Friday, recounting a year that was upended by the coronavirus pandemic.

But Bethlehem, known for its innovation and vigor, made it through and the future of the city is looking strong, said Donchez, who because of Bethlehem’s term limits, is serving his eighth and final year as mayor.

“It’s been said that nothing accelerates innovation like a crisis. As we know, innovation has always been part of the Bethlehem story,” Donchez said in his speech at ArtsQuest on Friday morning.

“There’s no better example than our past with Bethlehem Steel. Perhaps now more than ever, we see our story transcend with innovation and



renewed entrepreneurial spirit happening all around us as a result of the pandemic.”

Financial: One of the main goals from his first 2014 “State of the City” address was to make Bethlehem financially sound. When Donchez took office that year, the city had a five-year, \$40 million projected deficit and a BBB- bond rating. Last year, Standard & Poor’s conducted a credit review and reaffirmed the city’s A+ credit rating with a stable outlook. Over the years, changes were made to make Bethlehem “leaner and stronger,” including consolidating departments, increasing new technologies, streamlining purchasing and refinancing debt, Donchez said.

Roads: Since 2014, city officials have milled and paved more than 40 lane miles with 40,000 tons of blacktop. This past year, they paved 13.14 lane miles. The purchase of new equipment, such as a spray patch truck to fill potholes, has made the city more efficient in making repairs.

Sustainability: The city is committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and adapting to the impacts of climate change. This past week, [city officials unveiled a new Climate Action Plan](#) that calls for reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 33% by 2025, by 60% by 2030, and achieving net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2040. City officials also plan to purchase 100% of municipal energy from renewable resources by 2030.

Recreation: Realizing how important it is to have a walkable city, Donchez said city officials are about to begin the fifth phase of the city’s South Greenway project, which will ultimately connect to Saucon Park. Thanks to a grant from Northampton County, Bethlehem is also in the midst of conducting a feasibility study on a pedestrian bridge that would connect the North and South sides of the city. Memorial Pool, which opened in 1957, has undergone a \$5 million renovation that includes a shallow-entry pool for young children, an activity pool with two flume slides, and a competition pool with six lap lanes and two diving boards. The municipal golf course had \$1.75 million in renovations over the past

two years, including construction of a new pavilion, new cart paths, a new irrigation system and restored sand traps.

Public Safety: From 2003 to 2009, the city did not replace any of its fire trucks. As a result, Bethlehem had an aging fleet that had to be brought up to national standards, Donchez said. During his tenure, the city purchased eight new advanced life-support emergency services vehicles and five new fire engines, as well as an all-terrain vehicle for responding to off-road emergency calls. Donchez also recommended the city's first female police chief, Michelle Kott, **who was approved by City Council for the role last year.** Kott recently reorganized the police department, **the first such restructuring in more than 20 years.** The restructuring resulted in a division focusing on getting more officers to interact with the public, including at community events.

Helping businesses navigate the pandemic: Last year, city officials directed more than \$2 million of investment into downtown businesses. This included purchasing outdoor dining equipment, setting up parklets, purchasing personal protective equipment, direct grants to companies and funding for the Southside Ambassador program to maintain a safe and inviting atmosphere.

Development: Since 2014, city officials have approved 1,059 multi-family housing units through Bethlehem's land development process. In 2019, city officials saw 3,434 permits pulled for an estimated \$308 million in construction costs. Despite the pandemic, 2,988 permits were pulled last year for an estimated \$305 million in construction costs. Since the closing of Bethlehem Steel in 1995, the city has seen an investment of \$1.6 billion and approximately 8,000 jobs on the reformed 1,800-acre-site. Wind Creek Hospitality is also in the process of constructing a \$120 million, 270-room hotel there.