

State of the City, January 20, 2022

Mayor Andrew J. Nowick

I've been thinking about this speech for a couple of weeks now. I've always marveled at the audacity of the president to begin his state of the union speech with a single adjective. And maybe in tonight's moment of silence you came up with a single adjective for the state of the city as you see it, but try as I might, I could not find a single word. Here are the six words that will frame my thoughts: battered, recovering, overextended, changing, supported, and hopeful.

The city is battered. Ida came with a ferocity that will be remembered all our lives. In a few short hours, scores of families were rescued, or fled, from their flood-ravaged homes, dozens of businesses were destroyed, and city infrastructure was mangled almost out of recognition.

Since that awful day of tears and grief and worry, I have spoken to hundreds of residents. I have read the four hundred and twenty-six damage reports filed with the city by our people and businesses. I have walked the creeks end-to-end and visited the twenty-odd municipal sites that need our attention. The city is battered. Of the sixteen houses across from Basil Bandwagon, only one or two have seen the return of occupants. Village apartments is a ghost town. The back yards of houses on Swan street are long gone, swept away. Dancing, pizza, coffee, art, music, all gone from Canal Studios. Damage in the many millions of dollars. And our people, still battered—trying to figure out how, or if, a return is even possible.

Not to mention Covid. Or tax increases, which I'll get to in a moment.

The city is recovering. Triage began before the water receded. Hundreds of neighbors and emergency personnel set upon the remnants and began the recovery. What Ida wrought, this city returned with an immediate counterpunch of human empathy and action. From the first, "how can I help?" the city has been recovering. Residents are rebuilding their homes, their lives, making decisions, finding a way. The city has identified twenty-two sites in need of repair or

reconstruction. Business owners got to work applying for permits and are actively rebuilding. Hundreds of thousands of dollars were raised and distributed. Ow Wow Cow has reopened, as has Basil Bandwagon. Both the Delaware Valley Food Pantry and Fisherman's Mark never faltered and continue to help this city and its people recover. Little by little we recover. "Recovering" is a word we will hear a lot this year.

But I must caution. There will never be a full recovery – some residents will not return, and many will continue to suffer enormous financial and emotional hardship; the creeks will never look like they did in August; our business community may not entirely recalibrate. In ways both great and small, recovery may look more like inertia settling in, an uninvited and unwanted guest. In a fell swoop, Ida demarked this city and its people into a before and after. Something that seemed impossible became possible, and what we can't recover we must transform into preparation and resolve.

What is certainly not recovering this year is our municipal budget.

The city is overextended, stretched beyond reason. This is where I begin my mayorship. I say from the start I am not interested in litigating every historical explanation for this, nor is my style to affix blame or judgment. People have told me I'm inheriting a mess. I don't even like the word inherit. I begin each day with what's in front of me, plain and simple, a problem to be solved, if it can be solved. What's in front of me—what's in front of us—is a very lousy year, and that, my friends, is an understatement. Our taxes have increased, our debt remains high, our budget is already barebones, and at best our revenues are likely to be flat. We will have to borrow large sums of money to pay for Ida repairs. The city is not only battered by Ida and Covid, but it's battered by its financial situation, and I'd be surprised if there isn't a single household for whom this doesn't pose a concern.

In ordinary terms, let's look briefly at the state of the DPW as a living metaphor of how the city is stretched. It is important to note that some of why this department is in difficulty has to do with our inability to fully staff it. This is hard work for little pay and today's labor market says no thank you to these jobs. Currently, the DPW has six full time employees, five of whom are picking up trash and recycling, leaving Lester to do everything else, including a lot of engine repairs for an ever-aging fleet. In this fleet, we have three trash trucks: two

purchased in 2009, listed in poor and fair condition respectively, and the third trash truck – our back-up—dates to 1998. Only four of our fifteen vehicles have been purchased in the last decade. Eleven of the fifteen vehicles are listed in fair, poor, or bad condition. The garage is too small, and I haven't the least idea when we sent a single dollar over there for any kind of improvement.

Looking elsewhere: City Hall, the Library, the Police Department, the Justice Center. The city will soon receive a comprehensive review of these facilities, but it doesn't take an architect or a specialist to see these buildings are woefully under-cared for. It is a widely accepted idea that everyone loves our historic buildings; and yet there is no identifiable way to suggest we are good stewards of them. We have no capital improvement plan for our municipal buildings, and we allocate almost no money for their upkeep. Add to this the Closson farm – the purchase of which I supported—and you will find more than enough proof to know the city is living beyond its means.

Last year, debt service was over 1.4 million dollars. This year, our debt service, coupled with a lack of reserves, will be a stranglehold on every budgetary decision we make in 2022.

The city is changing, and here is something I will address in each State of the City speech—because change, as we know, is constant. Last night, after a long and tiring day, I went to the bar at Bell's for dinner. I ended up having conversations with a few residents and invariably, change came up. Concerns about development, concerns about losing a way of life that seems simpler, more comforting, more neighborly. In truth, the old days are as elusive as August 30, 2021. Lambertville is changing. Real estate values have risen; new people are coming; others are departing. There will be development. Broad demographic shifts are happening before our eyes and there isn't always much we can do about them. The city is changing, but it is changing through a base of well-established history and culture, and for that we can feel comforted. We should encourage the change we want to see. What does that change look like to you?

The city is supported. Supported by municipal employees who show up at early, stay late, mop the floors of the Justice Center after a flood. Our staff is a tremendous asset to the city. In the DPW, Lester, John, and Dave have a combined 73 years' worth of service. The top members of our police force can

easily match that. The city is supported by a staff in City Hall that works endlessly to file FEMA Reports, correspond with residents, keep the books in order, and so on. This city is supported by the police department, the fire department, the Rescue Squad, the LMUA, the Library, the churches, and many organizations whose missions benefit us all. This city is supported by over a hundred people serving on our boards and commissions. This city is supported by residents who quietly and bigheartedly volunteer where there is need. The city is supported by its history. The city is supported by its taxpayers. The city is supported by a diverse and committed business community that is the lifeblood of our economy. This city is supported by its artists. This city is supported by the laughter of children and the dedication of teachers. This city is supported by a city council that gives most generously of its time and wisdom. This city is supported by your mayor, who thinks sometimes making a list is the best reminder of all the good things right in front of him—all the good things right in front of us.

The city is hopeful. After the ills of Pandora's box have spread wide and far, hope alights. We are hopeful because history stands guard; because residents rush to help in times of crisis; because government welcomes dissenting views; because we cherish what I think of as a patina of scrappiness that keeps us going with grit and determination toward the next moment. We are hopeful because businesses keep coming; because new residents make a difference, because long-timers keep us honest; We are hopeful because after years of tax increases and a horrendous flood, the residents of this town voted to raise their own taxes to fund new and better schools for the future children of Lambertville. We are hopeful because we know cannabis will soon fund our coffers, while calming us down. We are hopeful because, despite the hardships, the taxes, the worries, we are glad to be here and because, as everyone knows, the state of the city of Lambertville is exceptional.

Lambertville has a new mayor. And while the state of his mind may occasionally be called into question, his dedication will never be. In my first year, I will cement my commitment to public service with the confidence of a 57-year-old man who is not afraid of any problem or any conversation. In the year 2022, I will: engage with residents, manage the recovery from Ida, collaborate with council, shepherd the budget process openly and responsibly, improve city services, notably as they pertain to the DPW; oversee the creation of sustained, long-term mitigation and resiliency planning, partner with the library, organize the clean-out of junk from city hall, be present in our business community, work toward creating affordable

housing, move the Closson farm forward to its best public use, and oversee a clean-up of the DPW yard. Lastly, I hope to get an open-air farm market started in town.

All of this is a massive undertaking, but I'll meet every day with good cheer and gratitude for this community.

Thank you.