

STATE OF THE CITY ADDRESS

JANUARY 17, 2023

by Paul Grenier, Mayor

The past year of 2022 has been a good year for the long term future of our great city. We began the year looking for a qualified replacement for long time City Manager Jim Wheeler and we could not be more proud of the hiring of Philip Warren Jr. as our new manager. Phil is very experienced in a host of areas in municipal management in communities large and small with varying degrees of wealth. During his second interview, Mr. Warren was eager to take on the challenges the City of Berlin faces as we reinvent our future and I am excited to work side by side with him as we chart a new course. Public acknowledgment must be given to Community Development Director/Asst. City Manager Pam Laflamme, Deputy Public Works Director Mark Lapointe and City Comptroller Holly Larsen for their herculean efforts to keep our city moving during the 6 months Berlin was without a city manager.

January 2 of last year also saw the retirement of long time Berlin Police Chief Peter Morency. Chief Morency served for decades in various roles of law enforcement including the ever dangerous NH Drug Task Force. Pete continues to serve our community as a Berlin City Councilor and is currently president of the New England Police Chiefs' Association. Long time Deputy Chief Dan Buteau was promoted to Berlin Police Chief and has done a remarkable job in today's difficult law enforcement environment.

The most exciting news of 2022, however, is Berlin's grant awards totaling nearly \$21,150,000! With the steadfast support of our very effective members of the Berlin City Council, I worked hand in hand with our federal delegation members as well as fellow members of the Coos County Board of Commissioners and Delegation to secure badly needed funding. This is a prime example of how developing good, honest, long term working relationships with dedicated people of both parties benefit the people I was elected to serve.

The grant funds will take some time to draw down as there are very strict federal guidelines we must follow. Among the smaller projects that will be completed at little to no cost to Berlin include the completion of the East Mason Street bridge over the canal, engineering for the installation of water and sewer infrastructure phase 1 to extend to Jericho Mountain State Park, a new salt shed for Berlin Public Works (finally!!), a brand new state of the art 4WD pumper truck for the Berlin Fire Department and finally a grant to study the feasibility of supplying effluent water from the Berlin Pollution Control facility to White Mountain Paper Company and treating their effluent. The granddaddy of all the grants is the full depth reconstruction of Main and Pleasant Streets. Beginning from the Post Office, construction will head down Exchange Street to Main Street, all the way up Main Street to Good Shepard Church, back down Pleasant

Street to the Post Office. It will include all connecting side streets, water sewer and storm drain infrastructure, the removal and replacement of the box culvert "bridge" on lower Main Street that has been slowly failing for years. Light poles will be new and with the snow melt grid as part of the final project, that area of the city will be ice and snow free during winter months. It was that part of this ambitious project that earned the scoring to be awarded the grant.

As all residential homeowners in Berlin and Gorham witnessed last month, myself included, not all news is positive to report and I will not downplay the impacts. The crazily rapid increases in prices of homes sold in our area in the last five years have created a massive shift in property tax allocation. The amount to be raised by taxes from this spring remained unchanged but the allocation from various property classes did. Commercial values had a very small overall increase as did the values of utilities. Utility values are subject to conditions as of April 1st in the new tax year. Because utility property is essentially a calendar year behind in change of values, we expect some upward change in the coming year. As a result, utility values went from about 36% of Berlin's tax value to 25%. Commercials also went down as a percentage so you can see how we were all affected. That said, the amount to be raised by taxes this coming year, an item under direct control of the City Council, will come under heavy scrutiny. This issue also raises the critical importance of the Main/Pleasant Street reconstruction project. Poor infrastructure conditions will not attract investor dollars, which in turn will not increase values from the center of our downtown. Our big bond issue the city took for the Rt 110 realignment will mature in FY 2026 (three years), freeing up nearly \$440,000 annually for street repair. The city is currently developing a plan with North Country Council to address roadway rehabilitation, condition of subsurface utilities and traffic volume to maximize the efficiency of the \$500,000 that will become available on an annual basis.

Finally, on a lighter note, I want to take a moment to recognize a few organizations who perform tremendous work volunteering to make our city a better place. First, I can never forget "Championship Sunday" last March. Berlin High School boys, Berlin Youth Hockey Pee Wees and Berlin Youth Hockey Mites all won their state tournaments. It was a very proud moment for Berlin's rich hockey history. Ryan-Scammon Post 36 Jr Legion Baseball team, coached by DJ Johnson and Rick Mercier, won the state title. Consisted of young players from throughout the North Country, these athletes made Berlin proud. Nansen Ski Club continues to put Berlin back on the map with Nordic skiing events and I'm praying we get snow for the upcoming winter carnival. The Androscoggin Valley Chamber of Commerce is back in full force after being restricted by COVID-19 for over two years. All of the chamber sponsored events went off without a hitch, including an unforgettable Riverfire celebration. There are many more awesome, standout volunteers who do great work without an ounce of recognition, and for that, I thank you.