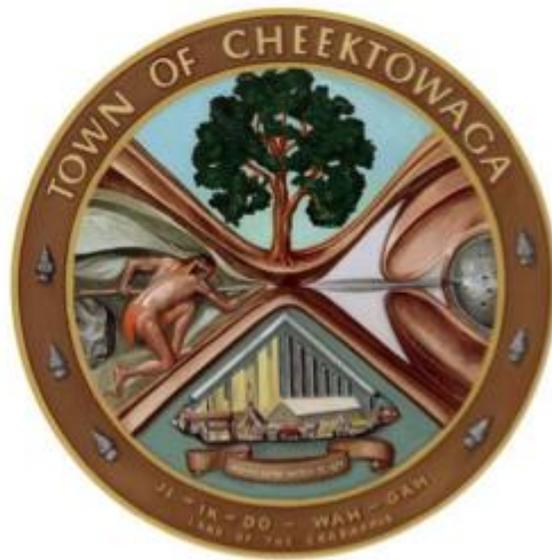


STATE OF THE TOWN ADDRESS



Diane Benczkowski
Cheektowaga Town Supervisor
Thursday, January 18, 2018

2018 State of the Town Address

Thank you for joining me for the 2018 State of the Town Address. A heartfelt thank you to the Cheektowaga Chamber of Commerce for hosting this great event. What a pleasure it is to bring together stakeholders from the entire town. We are all here today because we care so deeply about our Town. We all have one goal and that is to make Cheektowaga the best place it can be to live, work and raise a family. This is my third state of the town address and it amazes me every year what we are able to accomplish.

I'm not sure how much more praise I can give to Kristina Groff for her great work year after year. The partnership between the Chamber and the Town has grown stronger and stronger every day. Thank you to the entire Chamber staff, Chairman Mark Meyerhofer, the Board of Directors and the membership! What an amazing partnership this has become!

I am thankful to be joined by my excellent partners in Town government. Deputy Supervisor Tim Meyers has been there since day one helping me manage the day-to-day operations within our town. The residents of this town rewarded him and Councilmember Rogowski this year by re-electing them and congratulations to our newest Councilmember, Brian Nowak. I am proud to continue serving with all of them. I would also like to recognize our other Town of Cheektowaga elected officials:

- Councilmember Jerry Kaminski
- Councilmember Chris Adamczyk
- Councilmember Linda Hammer
- Highway Superintendent Mark Wegner
- Town Clerk Vickie Dankowski
- Town Justice Paul Piotrowski and
- Town Justice Dennis Gorski

Town Clerk Vickie Dankowski has done a tremendous job in her two years as Town Clerk. And I must point out that she and her staff stepped up to the plate when the Governor issued an executive order on the Friday before Christmas weekend to collect 2018 property taxes before the end of the year. Vickie worked hard through the weekend and on Christmas day, setting up the tax collection for the mad end-of-the-year rush. I commend them for getting the job done.

I also want to acknowledge other colleagues in government:

- Senator Tim Kennedy and his representatives; and
- Assemblymember Monica Wallace
- Village of Sloan Mayor Tom Ferrucci
- Village of Depew Mayor Jesse Nikonowicz
- Depew Trustee Jake Jakabowski

What tremendous advocates they have been for Cheektowaga and the many accomplishments from this past year.

Nothing accomplished this year is because of one person. Government is about people coming together. Teamwork and collaboration have paved the way for success and getting things done.

The most important job as Supervisor is to formulate and execute the budget.

Even though many challenges continue to face our residents, I am committed to ensuring that the Town is run in a fiscally responsible manner each and every day.

I once again convened a Citizens Budget Advisory Committee made up of more than 20 residents with the goal of evaluating and recommending expense reductions. Budget Director Stanley Kaznowski headed the committee and presented the committee's recommendations to the Town Board. The committee suggested reductions in overtime and non-personnel expenses, and I was able to include an additional \$750,000 in savings in my 2018 budget.

While I was able to find savings elsewhere in the budget, other expenses did increase due to new demands, including continued compliance efforts with the New York State DEC consent order; removal of dead and dying ash trees; and the high number of zombie properties throughout the Town. Additionally, the Town needed to account for increased costs due to contractual obligations (including wage increases for bargaining unit contracts settled during 2017); state mandated minimum wage increases of 7%; and premiums on health insurance increasing by 11.2%. These increases in contractual expenses accounted for an additional \$1.7 million of appropriations. This is why it is necessary for everyone within Town government to be working hard to ensure we are fiscally prudent with your tax dollars.

With the help of the Town Board's Director of Finance, Brian Krause, my proposed budget totaled just over \$91 million and increased the tax rate by 1.86%, which was under the NYS tax cap. An average home in the Town would have seen their tax bills increase by only \$29.83, which was still lower than tax bills levied in 2010. I should mention that last year's budget reflected a 1.64% decrease to the tax rate and lowered tax bills. The end result this year was that the Town Board decided to add back some expenses to my proposed budget and the tax rates ultimately will go up by 2.09% or increase average tax bills by \$33.49.

The budget is a guide for our town and in no way does it mean if it's in the budget it has to be spent. Each and every purchase will continue to be scrutinized and re-evaluated.

I continue to explore every funding source available to offset the burden of rising costs on our Town's taxpayers, including aggressively pursuing grants offered at the state and federal level. Cheektowagans certainly pay their fair share of NYS and Federal taxes, so why don't we try and get some of that money back to benefit projects right here in our

town? Applying for grant funding is an area of huge success and importance to trying to limit the impact on our taxpayers.

In 2016, I asked the Town Board to hire Sue Barnes of Grantmakers Advantage to be the Town's grant writer. We also needed eyes and ears on the ground in Albany, communicating with state officials on a minute-by-minute basis about our needs, which is why we retained the government relations firm of Bolton-St. Johns, led by Jack O'Donnell and Camille Brandon. The power duo of Sue Barnes and Bolton-St. Johns has provided record-breaking grant results of over \$10 million in just two years.

You can see some of the examples of successful grant awards on the screen beside me.

We also owe a huge thanks and are indebted to our State representatives - Senator Tim Kennedy and Assemblymember Monica Wallace. Without their combined efforts, hard work and advocacy we would not have been successful receiving all these grants.

Last year, I was incredibly proud to stand before you and announce the \$5 million grant and \$15 million interest free loan from New York State to reline our sanitary sewers. This was a record grant for the Town. Would it be possible for Cheektowaga to strike gold once again? Yes we did! This year, I am once again ecstatic to announce that the town received another \$5 million grant to address our DEC consent order.

The monies provide us the ability to make sure clean, storm water does not infiltrate the sanitary sewer system. In 2017, we were able to address 9.9 miles of sewer system, approximately 30% complete. We will continue the rehabilitation with that additional funding.

We are definitely seeing results with only 7 main sewer backups recorded based on the extreme amount of rain we received this past summer.

Cheektowaga also pursued the Clean Energy Communities initiative promoted by the Governor this past summer. We were in a race against other large communities from Western New York with only two \$250,000 grants being made available to the first two communities to achieve this designation.

I am proud to say that out of all "large communities" in Western New York, Cheektowaga was able to achieve this designation and did so by completing four high-impact actions identified by NYSERDA:

1. Adopting a standardized/unified solar permit process;
2. The town's code enforcement officers completing energy code training;
3. Making clean energy upgrades to town-owned properties that accounted for a 10% reduction in energy use, including the most recent renovation of the Kenneth J. Meyers Cheektowaga Recreation Center; and finally
4. Purchasing a 2014 Smart electric vehicle.

The \$250,000 grant made available with this designation is a great opportunity for Cheektowaga.

The “winning” project submitted, is a proposal to invest in electric vehicles and charging stations that incorporates solar technology. The idea is to phase out older gas vehicles for new electric vehicles. The electric cars would greatly reduce the cost of gasoline and traditional mechanical maintenance, while the charging stations would be powered by solar energy and reduce utility costs. These cost savings would be set aside for future sustainability projects which would allow the fleet to be renewed in perpetuity.

Having raised three children in Cheektowaga and serving 12 years on the Depew School Board, I know the importance of supporting programs and activities for our youth and, in essence, have committed \$1.9 million to youth and recreation. The same amount of funding as last year would also go to our youth football and little leagues.

Our new youth director, Jillian Gorman-King has done a great job providing services with tightening financial constraints. We continue to provide recreational opportunities for all ages, budgeting more than \$2.3 million for the upkeep and maintenance of our parks and athletic fields.

Senior Services offer crucial transportation for our seniors to get to doctor visits, lunch programs and other quality of life places. Our Outreach Coordinators are the best, providing assistance with government programs, housing options, income tax preparation, and health insurance applications. This year our Director of Senior Services, Kerry Peek started the Century Club, celebrating those in our community that are celebrating their 100th birthday or others that make it past that milestone!

As Supervisor, I know we need to look out for our taxpayers, especially our large senior population. I always hear from residents that taxes are too high and they are asking for something to be done. Many of our residents are finding it difficult to make ends meet.

While I wish we could provide more funding to all programs and services, finding balance remains key in our fight to get taxes under control. In 2016, I formed the citizens’ budget advisory committee to help find ways where the Town could reduce spending. This past year was the second successful year for the budget advisory committee, by helping me submit a budget to the board that was fiscally sound and responsible.

With this in mind, I plan on creating a citizens Youth & Recreation advisory council to mirror the budget advisory committee in order to determine what programs our residents want. This will be made up of taxpayers, parents, and youth organizations within our town. We need to make sure the Town Youth & Recreation programs are not competing with each other.

Since day one I have advocated for open and transparent government. This past year I streamlined our work sessions to be held immediately prior to regular board meetings.

The board work sessions were moved into regular council chambers instead of a small, secluded conference room on the second floor. Additionally, I read the recommendations from the Buffalo Niagara Coalition for Open Government. We are now being more specific for our reason to go into Executive Session and also including the entering and exit times of executive session in our minutes.

This year the Governor's new initiative to reduce property taxes required a plan to contain "new recurring property tax savings" through actions such as, the elimination of duplicative services. The Governor proposed coordinated services such as joint purchasing; shared highway equipment and plowing services as a few examples.

County Executive Mark Poloncarz formed the County-Wide Shared Services Panel and submitted a Shared Savings Plan to the Governor.

The Town submitted two new initiatives: one with the county to coordinate central purchasing services; and one with the Village of Sloan to coordinate shared engineering services, making the Town eligible for a portion of the \$10 million the Governor set aside for municipalities that submitted new shared services plans.

We will continue to explore and engage in any agreement that saves money, benefits our residents and makes sense for our town.

Rebuilding, restoring and maintaining our neighborhoods is key to the success of our Town.

After a very long hiatus, the Town has started to demolish homes again. 17 Yvette, an address that drew the fire of its neighbors for nearly five years, has finally been taken down. For far too long it stood as an eyesore and safety hazard for its neighbors.

To help streamline the identification of zombie homes and enforcement of housing code, we put both the Community Development and Housing & Neighborhood Preservation departments under the leadership of Rich Willis. This move will also help individuals needing to repair their homes to bring them up to code with resources available such as Housing Rehabilitation Loans available through Community Block Grants.

Vacant and abandoned homes continue to impact our neighborhoods at an alarming rate.

In the past, the town has not had the resources available to properly combat and address this problem. This year, the Town received a \$250,000 grant as part of the "Zombie Remediation and Prevention Initiative". Cheektowaga finally has the financial resources to tackle vacant and abandoned properties with full force. Newly added code enforcement officers and clerical staff completed house-by-house inspections, evaluating more than 26,000 homes and identifying 528 vacant structures. We are actively pursuing full code violation orders on the vacant properties to make the owner, banks and service providers responsible for the maintenance and compliance with all Town ordinances.

A Vacant and Abandoned Property Task Force was also created and is focusing on developing policies and sustainable strategies to address vacant properties and educate delinquent homeowners.

The Town is also working with the Buffalo Erie Niagara Land Improvement Corporation (BENLIC) to acquire vacant properties – so far approximately 25 distressed, vacant, and tax-delinquent properties have been acquired with the first back on the market late last year.

Through the Housing Rehabilitation Loan Program we saw 39 applicants helped with over \$500,000 spent in rehab and repair projects.

Through HOME Funding, which is used for the renovation and construction of homes for low-to-moderate income individuals, we have seen success on four different streets within town, as seen on the slides in front of you.

We made large investments in capital improvement projects in low-to-moderate income neighborhoods, spending \$1.52 million in Federal block grants, saving the town from having to pay these expenses.

You can see the list of some of the CDBG funded capital improvements projects on the screen beside me.

Included is a full road reconstruction with new curbing, drainage, paving, landscaping and sidewalk replacement on Greenleaf near Cheektowaga Town Park.

The highway department has milled and paved 75% of town roads since 2009 and they are using their equipment and visibility to bring awareness and understanding to important causes. In 2017, the Highway Department added a blue, puzzle ribbon wrapped autism awareness truck to its fleet. Last year, the Highway department unveiled a pink truck for cancer awareness.

The town also took action with the owner of the now vacant Manor Oak Nursing home at 3600 Harlem Road and applied for a \$1 million Restore NY grant. The proposal would create an 80 unit apartment building targeted towards senior living. Affordable senior housing is lacking and this project will aid in further revitalizing the Harlem Road corridor.

Through the Cheektowaga Economic Development Corporation, a \$500,000 loan was provided to Latina Foods. The CEDC low interest loan funds are being utilized for inventory and working capital and will add 15-20 full-time employees with half being provided to low/mod income individuals.

Every homeowner I speak to usually has questions regarding the assessment review process. Cheektowaga, along with Western New York, has been experiencing a red hot real estate market. Homes are selling for higher than their assessed value forcing

assessments to go up. While we cannot control market forces, I am continually trying to evaluate the assessment system to make it fair for all.

With the help of our new Town Assessor Jill Murphy, a new law enacted by the Town Board will make it easier for individuals and families to make major home improvements without being immediately hit by a higher assessment and paying a higher tax dollar amount. The new Exemption of Capital Improvements to Residential Buildings Law will apply to any home improvements, alterations and reconstruction to one, two or three family owner-occupied homes that raises the assessment of the property by \$10,000 or more. The exemption is valid for five years, with 50% of the added assessment being exempt and gradually decreasing over a five-year period.

After 10 years of waiting for action, the former Garden Village Plaza was finally demolished. I promised that the revitalization of this plaza would be one of my top priorities, and after working closely with the owner of the property, we are finally seeing results. This site will be developed into a light manufacturing and warehousing project which will create hundreds of well-paying jobs and will continue the positive commercial development we have seen in the French/Union corridor.

Cheektowaga has seen millions of dollars in investment into the town in recent years and this year was no different. Cheektowaga remains the epicenter for new businesses and restaurants to expand into the Western New York market.

- Chick-Fil-A chose Cheektowaga for their first location.
- Moe's erected a brand new building on Union Road with the first drive-thru in the area.
- In addition, Texas Roadhouse and LA Fitness opened in the same plaza further strengthening that area's revitalization.

We helped to support Small Business Saturday. It was great to highlight a local business such as Hanzlian's Sausage and Deli and the other small businesses we have in town. We are not just a giant retail town. We have many small and local options for food, shopping and entertainment and I suggest we continue to support them all year long.

We continued to celebrate the pride of Cheektowaga with the many festivals that are synonymous with our town.

This year we celebrated 4th of July with a twist. We organized our first ever "Freedom Fest". The first night corresponded with the Creekside Concert Series and the Boys of Summer performed. Then on July 3rd, nationally-known country music recording artist Ricky Lee entertained, recognizing our veterans, firefighters and first responders. We celebrated a wonderful 4th of July parade and included World War II Hero and Veteran, Howard Tobin, to serve as Honorary Grand Marshall.

The Town added some new and exciting participants to the Polish Festival this past year and teamed up with the Cheektowaga Chamber of Commerce to co-sponsor the event,

with the Chamber donating a portion of their proceeds to the Cheektowaga Youth and Senior Foundations. In addition, the Pulaski Association was able to persuade Poland's Secretary of State Anna Marie Anders to participate in the Pulaski Parade and also display her Trail of Hope exhibit at the park. In 2018, the Polish Festival will be celebrating its 40th Anniversary. I am proud to announce the town will set aside a \$12,000 grant for the Pulaski Association and will recognize them as an official Town sanctioned arts and cultural group.

Chief Dave Zack, his leadership team, and both the Police Club and Captain and Lieutenants leadership are in attendance today.

In 2017, we experienced something in Cheektowaga that we have only seen on TV or read in the news. A very dangerous situation developed when a gunman opened fire at a Dollar General store in town. The police responded quickly, with the help of civilians near the scene, the situation was ended without a fatality. This is all because of the training and experience of our police officers. Thank you for your service every day and thank you so much for your commitment to our safety.

Police are just one example of how amazing the employees of the town are.

Recently, Emergency Services Director Earl Loder was inducted into the Erie County Fire Services "Wall of Fame". He is such an asset to our town and I congratulate him on receiving this honor!

These examples of kindness and heroism from our employees and our residents is why I enjoy coming to work every day and working hard on your behalf. These are prime examples that show the state of our town is strong and will continue to be strong for years to come!

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

I thank you all for attending today and in the spirit of openness, I would once again like to open my time up for any questions from the audience.