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February 19, 2024

My Fellow Citizens of Warren:

As we enter the New Year, I believe it is appropriate to reflect on the accomplishments and challenges of 2023 and to look forward to strengthening our future. Although there are certainly challenges to be faced, we are making considerable progress with diligence and perseverance. I am confident that we will continue to make great strides in strengthening the City for generations to come.

The role of City government is to provide municipal services and infrastructure development that will enable the residents to succeed while consistently looking to the future. This goal helps to ensure we are investing in the projects that are necessary for the City's long-term viability. This investment must be completed in a financially responsible manner without overburdening our taxpayers and without taking on unsustainable debt and budget deficits. I am proud that the 2024 Municipal budget did not increase taxes and that we had an estimated \$4.5 million Fund Balance at the close of 2023.

The endeavor to strengthen the City for future generations is not the responsibility of City Council, Administration, and City Staff alone. City government's role is to aid in establishing conditions that easily allow our businesses, foundations, volunteers, and faith-based and philanthropic organizations to thrive for the betterment of our residents. Some of the most impactful work that happens within this community is the result of efforts by these organizations.

I would like to take this opportunity to reflect upon some of the City's accomplishments as well as the work and investments undertaken by private entities.

Please note that many of the grant funds mentioned throughout require a matching investment.

#### **ECONOMIC REDEVELOPMENT AND DOWNTOWN REVITALIZATION:**

- **Riverfront Redevelopment Project:** Many entities and levels of government are invested in this project which represents a significant investment in the former industrial area along the Allegheny Riverfront. Planning for the Project continued throughout 2023 and first steps in the permitting process were initiated. The Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) awarded funding to be utilized for the acquisition of properties that are integral to the Project.
- **Warren Community Education and Workforce Training Center:** The Warren County Development Association (WCDA) continued rehabilitation activities at its property located at the corner of Liberty Street and Second Avenue (former PNC Bank Building). The City facilitated multiple grants which are sub-granted to the WCDA to fund the ongoing work in one of the Commercial District's anchor buildings for use as a workforce education center. The WCDA will utilize grant funds from the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) to continue work on the project in 2024.

- **Wireless Communication Facilities:** Ordinance No. 1972 was enacted to bring the City's regulations into line with current state and federal regulations and to establish permitting guidelines for the construction/installation/removal of facilities.
- **Comprehensive Plan:** The City's Implementable Comprehensive Plan was adopted by Warren City Council in March of 2023. Subsequently, a Comprehensive Plan Task Force was formed for the purpose of guiding the implementation process and making recommendations to the Planning Commission and/or City Council.
- **Façade Improvement Program:** The Redevelopment Authority (RDA) administers this 50/50 DCED funded program to assist local business/property owners in the Commercial District in rehabilitating their storefronts. Of the ten projects funded in 2023, three were completed by the close of the year and the remaining seven are set to be completed in 2024.
- **New Home Construction:** Three new homes were constructed in 2023 and an additional three homes are expected to be built in 2024. This represents the largest rate of new home construction seen in several years.

#### **PARKS, RECREATION, AND LANDSCAPE:**

A key strength of the City is its commitment to providing parks and recreational opportunities for residents and visitors of all ages and abilities.

- **Beaty Park:** A new walking path and pavilion with water and electric facilities were constructed adjacent to the playground equipment and have been well received. The former pavilion was demolished and the land was restored.
- **Betts Park:** The softball infields (3) were resurfaced with a soil mix developed specifically for such use, new LED lighting was installed at Foley Field, and a new backstop and fencing were installed at Betts Field. An extensive water line project throughout the park was completed.

The Betts Park Pickleball Courts were completed in 2023 and a grand opening was held in August. The City and Warren Pickleball, Inc. entered into an agreement under which WPB provided the City with \$32,500 which the City invested for the purpose of maintaining and resurfacing the Betts Park Pickleball Courts when necessary.

- **CAR Pool:** The Pool continues to be a popular attraction during the summer months and realized record attendance and revenues in 2023.
- **Lacy Multi-Sensory Park:** The Rotary Club played an integral role in providing funding and planning for Phase I and Phase II improvements completed at the park. Members of the Club addressed Council in June of 2023, and stated the Club's intent to conduct Phase III. This Project includes the installation of a shade sail, a communication board for those who are nonverbal, a butterfly garden, and a one-quarter mile paved track around the park.
- **Summer Playground Program:** In recent years, the City was only able to staff two playground programs; however, in 2023, the City was able to hire enough staff to add a third playground. The three playgrounds that had programs were Beaty, Crescent,

and Lacy Playgrounds. The program offers diverse activities and field trips that promote recreation and learning opportunities.

- **Tree City USA:** The City was recognized on Arbor Day as a “Tree City USA” for the 35th consecutive year; the City is proud of its urban forest and the region’s Lumber Heritage. The Arbor Day celebration was held in conjunction with the Allegheny National Forest as it celebrated its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

## **MUNICIPAL SERVICES:**

The City’s professional staff is dedicated to delivering critical services to our residents. Police, Fire, EMS, Codes, and Public Works are supported by the general fund and are critical to the well-being of the City.

- **City Police:** The Police Cadet Training Program was implemented and the first officer graduated from the Mercyhurst Police Academy on December 20, 2023. The Department was awarded USDA funding which reduced the City’s general fund investment in two new patrol cars, including upfitting costs, by fifty (50) percent. A donation of \$20,000 was received from Seneca Generations for the purchase of four (4) Recon Patrol Bikes which are fully outfitted with lights, sirens, bags, and lettering; the community can expect to see officers on the bikes during daily patrols, at special events, and at community events. The bikes allow the Department to reduce its carbon footprint and provide greater maneuverability and accessibility in crowds. A new impound lot was constructed by DPW and provides greater security, easy accessibility, and additional space as compared to the former lot. Officers participated in Pizza with a Cop as a means to provide increased communication, awareness, and cooperation with students.

The City and the Fraternal Order of Police Lodge No. 83 successfully negotiated a three-year contract for the period of January 1, 2024 through December 31, 2026.

- **Emergency Medical Services (EMS) Agreements:** In 2022, Warren entered into an agreement with the Multi-Municipal Emergency Services Commission which was, at that time, comprised of Clarendon Borough, and Cherry Grove, Mead, and Pleasant Townships. The agreement addresses the provision of Basic Life Support (BLS) EMS services within those municipalities while maintaining the staffing needed to provide this critical service to our residents. As a result of the success of that agreement, in 2023, the City entered into agreements with Cherry Grove Township, Clarendon Borough, Glade Township, Pleasant Township, and Watson Township for the provision of EMS on a primary or backup provider basis. This is a tremendous accomplishment that will be of great benefit to all municipalities involved. Additional agreements are expected in 2024.
- **Fire Department:** Under the terms of the 2021 Memorandum of Understanding between the City and I.A.F.F. Local 1835 Firefighters Union, the City exercised its right to transfer the union position of Operations and Training Officer to the non-union position of Deputy Fire Chief. OTO duties as well as some disciplinary, administrative, and other duties were assigned to the Deputy Fire Chief. The Department received funding for installation of a high-efficiency vehicle exhaust extraction system in the Fire Department Truck Bay. This equipment will extract the exhaust resulting from daily testing and operation of the vehicles and improve air quality in the truck bay, office

area, training areas, and sleeping quarters. Following a hiatus, the Fire Department Explorers Post resumed activity in 2023 and is meeting regularly.

- **Department of Public Works:** This Department continues to provide support for all of the City's infrastructure and building maintenance. These areas include the storm/sanitary sewers and treatment plant, forty-five (45) miles of city roadways, and City-owned buildings and parks throughout the City.

Notable projects in 2023 included: 1) the CDBG-funded South Irvine Street Reconstruction Project; 2) award of Local Federal Aid Route, LFAR, funding for complete mill and overlay projects in 2024 on Upper Crescent Park (Veterans Memorial Bridge to the City line), Lexington Avenue (portion), and Madison Avenue (Malvina Street to Park Avenue); 3) in-house construction of the new Police Department Impound Lot; 4) in-house construction of a new road salt storage structure at the DPW Garage; 5) in addition to standard catch basin repair/replacement projects, the Department utilized a Nyloplast type catch basin which is a more durable and corrosion-resistant product; 6) continued to monitor electric and gas utility rates in order to lock in optimal pricing; and 7) oversaw refurbishment of the Northwest Fountain. Although the Pennsylvania Avenue and Market Street Roundabout was not a City project, the DPW worked with PennDOT throughout the project and the center island plantings are expected to be installed by a City crew in Spring 2024.

- **Department of Codes, Planning, and Zoning:** The Department worked closely with the Planning Commission, Blighted Property Review Committee, Redevelopment Authority, Zoning Ordinance Steering Committee, and the Comprehensive Task Force; all of which share the common goal of community improvement and revitalization. City Council approved a resolution authorizing the City to join the Warren County Landbank which is a mechanism which member municipalities may utilize in addressing vacant, abandoned, and tax delinquent properties within their jurisdictions.
- **COVID Impact:** Residual impacts of the pandemic continue to impact procurement activities as evidenced by substantial delays in the receipt of goods ordered by various departments and the scheduling of services. Items impacted include fire hoses, new vehicles, vehicle and machinery parts, and the Municipal Building elevator project (expected to be completed in Spring 2024).

#### **ZONING ORDINANCE REWRITE:**

The City obtained a grant to facilitate a full review and revision of the existing Zoning Ordinance. Mackin Engineering Company was contracted to guide and advise the Zoning Steering Committee and the Planning Commission in developing a new ordinance which is reflective of current trends and forward thinking. As of this writing, the proposed ordinance is in the Public Comment Period and it is anticipated that it will be before Council for its consideration at the March 18, 2024, regular meeting of City Council.

#### **2024 MUNICIPAL BUDGET:**

Great work was done to pass a no tax increase budget while forecasting an unrestricted fund balance of \$3.9 million at the end of 2024. The Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA) recommends that, at a minimum, local governments maintain a General Fund balance equal to 25% of its expenditures; this would equate to approximately \$2.5 million.

## **BUSINESS AND INDUSTRY:**

The success of, and continued investments by, businesses and industries located within the City are critical to the health and well-being of the City and surrounding communities. The careers and jobs they bring to the area enable our residents to live, work, and retire here. The City's role is to enable our businesses and industries to prosper and, while the City is not directly involved with these ongoing concerns, 2023 brought some significant developments and investments in the City with the following: 1) Salsa Soleil Butik renovated and moved into the former Valone's Shoe Store in time for the 2023 holiday season, 2) renovations commenced and continue at the site of the former Mardi Gras with the new Twig & Vine Wine Bar expected to open in early 2024, 3) renovations continue at NY Style Deli's new site with its opening expected in Spring 2024, 4) Lawson's West End Take Out expanded its operations by moving to the former Chido's Ferro Cucina in early 2023, and 5) after years of vacancy, the former Nichols & Dimes building was renovated and is now the site of the River's Edge restaurant and ice cream shop.

## **PHILANTHROPIC FOUNDATIONS AND FAITH-BASED AND SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS:**

The charitable nature of the Warren Community has long been one of its greatest strengths. These largely volunteer organizations have been, and continue to be, among the most important partners in the advancement of worthwhile projects within the City and Warren County. Along with the business and industry sector, many of the projects and events taking place within the City have received significant investment from generous philanthropic foundations and faith-based and service organizations. A prime example of this philanthropy is the DeFrees Family Foundation's commitment to providing funding to restore the historic bell towers located throughout the City. The tower adjacent to the Municipal Building was removed in late 2023 and, once back in place, the bells will play again.

## **LOOKING FORWARD:**

Along with looking back at all of the positive accomplishments of the past year we must also take a look at some of the challenges to be addressed in order to continue to strengthen our city. Warren County's population continues to decline, thus reducing the amount of tax revenue available to local governments. This has a direct and material impact on municipalities' ability to provide and maintain critical services at the levels expected by our residents. In addition, Real Estate tax appeals settled in 2023 reduced the amount of taxes that would have been billed/collected for 2024 and ongoing appeals may result in further reductions. The county-wide property reassessment project is ongoing and is expected to have a degree of impact on real estate tax rates once it has been completed.

Unfortunately, the national inflation rate continued to place pressure on municipal, business, and household budgets and requires not only continued evaluation of the necessary costs to provide services in the short-term but will also require continued diligence in assuring that we are investing for the future in a responsible manner.

All sectors of the labor force have been faced with significant challenges. A willing and skilled workforce is required for the business, industry, and service sectors to continue to thrive and invest in their futures.

Tragically, our community has been directly impacted by the scourge of the drug epidemic within the United States and, most recently, by the presence of fentanyl. Our

professional Police Department, along with other law enforcement agencies, will continue to take all actions necessary to combat this illegal activity to the fullest extent of the law. Likewise, fire and EMS first responders will continue to provide BLS to those in need.

**IN CONCLUSION:**

I would like to emphasize the great work done within the City of Warren in 2023, there is a great deal to be proud of! As we progress through 2024, we need to be mindful that the work to strengthen our future is a constant process and we are committed to working hard for the City and its citizens.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'David G. Wortman', with a horizontal line extending to the right.

David G. Wortman  
Mayor