Thank you for joining us tonight as we speak to the State of the Town of Brighton for 2023. As we do at significant events and gatherings here, I first acknowledge that the Town of Brighton is situated on the ancestral and traditional lands of the Onödowá’ga tribe of the Haudenosaunee confederacy—whom we recognize and respect as the traditional custodians of this land throughout the generations. We pay our respect to Onödowá’ga elders both past and present. The history, culture and traditions of the Onödowá’ga are truly worthy of our understanding and study and we praise those who keep those traditions alive. We recognize that their study is of ongoing importance if we are to truly understand the history of our community and our nation. We support efforts to ensure that we and future generations continue to respect and recognize the Onödowá’ga in a way that is honest and truthful so that in the words of Sagoyewatha, the great Haudenosaunee chief and orator, also known as Red Jacket, we may always work together to brighten the chain of friendship.

Tonight, together, we can be proud to live in Brighton and proud of our many accomplishments from the past year. We have not gotten to where we are today as a community by resting on our laurels and we acknowledge that while we face great opportunities we also face real challenges as we move forward. In this State of the Town message, I will lay out some of those accomplishments, and share my vision of Brighton’s future, understanding that we will face challenges, some of which are regional, national or even global. Meeting those challenges will take hard work and will require collaboration at all levels. I know that we are up to the test and that our shared commitment to Brighton as a diverse, welcoming, safe and sustainable community, will be our guiding star as we face and overcome the challenges ahead.

2020 Census data and other organizational data shows that Brighton is the most diverse town in Monroe County. I believe that is a statistic to celebrate and an opportunity for Brighton to demonstrate that diversity can strengthen a community and can foster engagement, learning and celebration among residents and can fundamentally bring community and neighborhood residents closer together in a shared embrace of different life experiences. That was some of the thinking behind the establishment of Brighton’s volunteer Inclusion, Diversity and Equity Advisory Board, the IDEA Board, at the encouragement of Councilmember Robin Wilt in 2019. Since then, the IDEA Board met through the pandemic, garnering public input on its plans, particularly on its plans to develop the Inclusion, Diversity
and Equity Action Plan, the “IDEA Plan”, which was adopted by the Town Board in 2021. Even before the IDEA Plan was approved by the Town Board, the Board funded the position of Chief Diversity Officer in the 2022 Budget, and we had the good fortune to hire Miriam Moore nearly a year ago. Since that time, Miriam has led internal quarterly DEI training and communications, helped organize significant community celebrations such as Juneteenth and Pride, played a significant role in hiring decisions, and worked with each Town Department Head to get input and implement best practices in their departments. She has also engaged deeply with the broader Brighton community, building on her existing relationships within the broader Rochester area. She has even gained recognition for her work on a statewide basis. In February, Miriam, Councilmember Wilt and I presented a program on Brighton’s experience advancing DEI at the NYS Association of Towns Annual Meeting in New York City. Over 50 Town officials from across the State attended the training, and we have received requests for follow up guidance from several towns since that time.

On a related front, Monroe County recently announced a list of about 200 area businesses that will qualify under a new County M/WBE program, identifying businesses that are controlled by women or members of minority groups, that we can use as part of our procurement processes. The County has implemented standards that make it easier for smaller businesses to qualify for this program than for the much more complicated state M/WBE program, and I am currently working to establish goals for the Town of Brighton to use these firms, along with state M/WBEs, for a greater portion of our procurement, keeping business local and encouraging the growth of small businesses that are the lifeblood of our local economy. Kudos to County Executive Adam Bello for this new initiative and a myriad of ways in which the County has collaborated with the Town of Brighton, since he was first elected a little over three years ago.

Brighton has received nationwide recognition in a number of areas over the past several years. Brighton was named the best place to live in New York State by the national registry Niche.com. Last year, Realtor.com, the website for the National Association of Realtors, named Brighton’s 14618 zip code the hottest zip code in America, based on market demand, measured by the number of individual views for listed homes, and the number of days listings remain active on Realtor.com. Now comes the news that Brighton Central School District Superintendent Dr. Kevin McGowan has just been named the best School District Superintendent in the nation. Dr. McGowan is not with us this evening, but I want to congratulate him and also note the important work in raising outcomes for all students within the Brighton Central School District as the reason for your recognition. Each of these awards are important because they highlight attributes of Brighton that make us an attractive community in which to live but also in which to do business. The awards we have received demonstrate the desirability of Brighton as a place to call home.
Going forward, we are also committed to bringing affordable housing to Brighton and we look forward to giving formal land use review to affordable housing proposals that are currently being discussed with Town staff. We also appreciate housing proposals like those included in the New York State Senate and Assembly 2024 one house budgets. Those proposals will offer useful incentives to communities that improve housing opportunities.

As we address housing needs, we can also be proud to continue to address the increased need for open space. During the pandemic, we all know that more people sought out outdoors activities. Recognizing this increased demand for open space, last year we completed the purchase of over 44 acres of land at the corner of Winton and Westfall Roads, recognizing the importance of this highly visible and centrally located parcel of land. With that purchase, Brighton’s Buckland Park now contains over 190 acres of open space, some of which is devoted to a combination of active recreation, lodge and field use, but the majority of which remains in its open natural state, serving as green space habitat for a wide variety of animal and plant species, as well as removing carbon emissions from the atmosphere.

Adding to open space in Brighton is just one of the many ways we are moving the needle on the critical issue of sustainability. Brighton has long held sustainability as a core policy value, and while we have already made a great deal of progress in making Brighton a more sustainable community, the best is yet to come. Indeed, it must be, because we and the world face an existential issue when it comes to climate change and carbon emissions. Brighton is a Climate Smart Community and a Clean Energy Community, both programs sponsored by the State of New York. Brighton has begun the purchase of electric vehicles and is seeking state grant funding to install a system of EV charging stations in locations around town. Brighton is updating its Climate Action Plan, with its long standing goal of measuring and then reducing greenhouse gas emissions, both from town operations as well as from the Brighton community as a whole. Our Sustainability Oversight Committee consists of volunteer community residents with expertise in sustainability, and we regularly seek their counsel.

Brighton cannot change the world alone, but we can serve as a role model and continue to lead the way, as we have for years, towards a greener Rochester area and a greener New York. Brighton is in a perfect position to incorporate another sustainability initiative, the urban planning concept of a 15-minute town, into planning and other decision making, and I am committed to adopting policies that will make Brighton more of a 15-minute town. Why is that important? A 15-minute town is one in which most necessities and services, including employment opportunities, shopping, education, healthcare, leisure and worship are accessible within a fifteen minute walk, transit, or bike ride, thereby reducing car dependency, promoting sustainable lifestyles and improving quality of life. One of the ways we will work to achieve this goal is that we will work with our partners in government as well as neighborhood residents, to fund and build more sidewalks and trails, rejecting sprawl. We have already worked with State and County government to advocate for road diets, turning four lane roads that encourage sprawl
and excessive speeds, into three lane complete streets, with multimodal sidewalks or bike lanes, and we expect to see more and more arterial highway projects incorporate these complete street concepts in the very near future. I also support a thorough consideration of the recommendation of the Sustainability Oversight Committee to include the review of clean energy options for new Town building proposals, including the proposed Town Hall renovation project and the proposed community center project. It may not be possible to incorporate every clean energy option into every project, but it is important that as we plan for our future that we do so considering green energy options to make sure that we prepare for a future where high level carbon emissions are no longer an acceptable option.

We know that Brighton’s effective use of incentive zoning and other smart growth planning techniques for the review of development projects, including redevelopment of existing commercial districts, the encouragement of mixed uses and somewhat denser development limits, particularly near natural community hubs like the Twelve Corners will not only advance our sustainability goals, but also make Brighton a more walkable, more livable and more accessible community for all. It will also enhance tax revenues and community amenities in a community where new commercial development opportunities are hard to come by, but the redevelopment of existing commercial land and the incorporation of mixed-use development into an overall plan, can be transformative.

The Whole Foods Plaza project, surely the most talked about project and, unfortunately, the most litigated project, in Brighton’s history, is a prime example of a development project that incorporates smart growth principles. It is a project that is consistent with Brighton’s comprehensive plan, and it is a project that promotes economic development along one of Brighton’s primary commercial corridors. It will make Brighton more of a 15-minute town, incorporating not only a new active transportation corridor, the Auburn Trail, but also essential food and healthcare opportunities within a 15-minute walk or bike ride for many people. All of the new buildings on the site are constructed on land zoned for commercial use, redeveloped from prior commercial uses.

The Town and its residents have already received the three primary incentive zoning amenities related to the project. The first and most important amenity is the construction of the Auburn Trail, running north/south approximately two miles from the Rochester border to the Pittsford border. In Brighton, the Auburn Trail runs along a long abandoned rail line and will provide recreational opportunities as well as pedestrian and bicycle access to the Whole Foods Plaza. The second project amenity is a new service road behind the businesses across Monroe Ave. from the Whole Foods Plaza, constructed as part of an access management plan to provide safer and improved access to Monroe Ave. This access road was recommended in Brighton’s 2011 Monroe Ave. design charette, led by former Board member Sheila Gaddis. Together with the new traffic signals at the entrance to the Whole Foods Plaza, the access management plan allows all traffic at the businesses across Monroe to enter and exit those businesses safely, without being forced to make left turns without a traffic signal. This improvement, along with
other design improvements in the area, has reduced the number of motor vehicle accidents, improving safety and reducing the traffic congestion that can be caused by an accident. The final amenity is a conservation easement over a parcel of land approximately one acre in size, east of the Plaza, which will serve as a buffer to the project for Clover Street residences.

These amenities were provided at no cost to Brighton taxpayers, because the Town used the state incentive zoning framework for project approval. Incentive zoning allows communities like Brighton to require developers to offset impacts with community amenities, as the Town of Brighton did with the Whole Foods project. The Town of Brighton went several steps further. During the development review process, the Town Board held five public hearings and in response to input we heard at those hearings, the project was significantly reduced in size and access from the project to either Allens Creek or Clover was prohibited. Finally, of course, this project will generate property tax revenues, projected at over $400,000 per year, which will reduce the pressure on residential taxpayers in Brighton. Contrary to the allegations repeatedly made by a paid lobbyist for Wegmans, there are no special tax deals on the project. None. At 50,000 square feet, the new Whole Foods is far less than half the size of the Wegmans store in Pittsford Plaza and, based on estimates by traffic engineers as part of the environmental review of the project, will cause less than a minute of traffic delay, once the likely initial excitement about the new store has abated. Whole Foods will provide new options for consumers, particularly for organic and healthy options, and the other businesses in the Plaza will also be welcome additions to the community. I am grateful to our building and planning department staff who have given this project detailed review and who persevered in their efforts despite controversy fomented by that same paid lobbyist and frivolous litigation funded by Wegmans intended solely to keep a competitor out of town.

Ironically, just this past week, a news organization in Virginia wrote about a lawsuit in that state, where Wegmans is arguing that it should receive a special exception to build a 1.7 million square foot warehouse close to a historic community in Virginia founded by freedpeople after the Civil War. Contrast that with the 50,000 square foot Whole Foods store here in Brighton that Wegmans has spent years and millions of dollars trying to block, with its mouthpiece falsely claiming some “special deal”. A brief filed in Wegman’s behalf in the Virginia case frets that there may be “years of litigation in each land use development project.” The irony of such a statement should not be lost on anyone. I will say it again. Wegmans has had its day…actually days and weeks and years…in court. Their often frivolous arguments have been turned down in court again and again, at great cost to taxpayers. Wegmans has had a reputation as a good corporate citizen. Tonight, I again call on Wegmans to show the Brighton community that that is still true. I call on Wegmans to finally put this frivolous litigation aside, refuse to fund any more appeals, and move forward to serve the community.

The safety of our community is an essential function of local government. It is also essential that the community is served by its first responders and law enforcement in a way in which every member of the
community can feel confident. Brighton is served by the Brighton Police Department, the Brighton and Henrietta Fire Departments and the Brighton Volunteer Ambulance. Each of those agencies are highly trained and locally controlled.

Each of our agencies has engaged in training to help ensure that they are able to recognize and work with individuals who are facing mental health crises. Later this evening, the Town Board will receive a communication, with identifying information redacted, from a Brighton resident thanking the Brighton Police Department for the professional and sympathetic manner in which they interacted with him when he was facing a mental health issue. That is always the goal of an agency committed to community policing, as the Brighton Police Department is. The Brighton Police Department is currently engaged in DEI training with Chief Diversity Officer Miriam Moore and I am very pleased that the Brighton Fire Department has established its own diversity committee, under the leadership of Fire District Commissioner David Metzger, who is with us this evening, and who has also met with Miriam Moore. This is one more indication of the value and strength of the position of Chief Diversity Officer and how her impact ripples through the community. Also important is the manner in which our local agencies work in collaboration together and also with other public safety agencies. Just yesterday, I participated in a training exercise with the Brighton Police and Fire Departments participating among many other agencies and organizations, and I witnessed first-hand how training and collaboration helps prepare our team for the kind of incidents that we have seen all too often across the nation and close to home. Thank you to each of our homegrown public safety agencies, Brighton Police, Brighton Fire, Henrietta Fire and Brighton Volunteer Ambulance, and to your representatives who are here tonight.

It goes without saying that one of the challenges we continue to face locally is a systematic set of issues with the performance of RG&E. Billing errors are endemic, not just in Brighton but throughout RG&E’s service area. My assistant, Bridget Monroe, has assisted scores of local households with their billing issues, but RG&E continues to send erroneous bills, or no bills, or both, to residents with alarming frequency. Our streetlight circuits fail too often and cannot support energy efficient LED lighting. Insufficient power supply and infrastructure continues to constrain much needed development in Brighton and elsewhere, and on top of all that, RG&E has again asked for a rate increase, this time a massive 20%. An RG&E representative even suggested that the rate increase was necessary to pay for improvements to a power circuit that has been failing residents along Edgewood Ave. with alarming frequency for years. My response was simple: No. We have brought neighborhood representatives together to hear RG&E’s plans for that circuit and other improvements, and we will do so again, but I have already testified against this latest request for a rate hike, just as I opposed their last request for a rate hike, and we will not stand by silently while our residents are held hostage to repeated service failures while a monopoly raises its rates with impunity. I encourage the Public Service Commission to reject any rate increase until RG&E has proven that they can address the problems at hand, and that they will closely examine the systemic problems at RG&E to explore ways to address the root cause of
those problems, which may include the fact that instead of being headquartered in downtown Rochester, as it was for years, RG&E is now merely a small part of an international utilities conglomerate, headquartered thousands of miles away. In the meantime, please continue to reach out to my office with your RG&E billing and other customer service problems, and Bridget will continue to do her best to get the company’s attention to your concerns. Thank you, Bridget.

The Brighton Farmers Market is a great community asset, under the leadership of Market Manager Sue Gardner Smith. The Market supports local farmers and producers and provides a community gathering place that no matter the weather, brings people, music, community groups and sustainably grown and produced food together. The Brighton Central School District has been our host, both for the summer Market at Brighton High School and the winter market at Brookside for many years and we are grateful for that. Again, I want to thank Superintendent Kevin McGowan for his continued collaboration with the Market.

The next Market chapter is about to begin. You have no doubt seen the construction on Westfall Rd., next to the barn that has already been renovated. An addition is being built to the barn, and by next fall, that facility will become the new home of the Brighton Winter Farmers Market. We appreciate the support this project has received over the years, first from Congressman Joe Morelle, when he was a member of the Assembly, and more recently from Assembly Member Sarah Clark. Congressman Morelle and our State delegation members, Senator Jeremy Cooney and Assemblymember Clark are in Washington and Albany, respectively, but each of them have been steadfast supporters of Brighton and our vision, and I thank each of them for their support.

Brighton’s fiscal condition is the strongest it has ever been. The most recent accolades for Brighton’s fiscal strength came from New York State Comptroller Thomas DiNapoli, who for the first time awarded Brighton a perfect score for fiscal strength in the Comptroller’s annual review of the fiscal stress levels faced by each municipality in the State during 2022. As we have discussed before, Moody’s bond rating agency rates Brighton AA2, one of its highest ratings. We continue to practice prudent fiscal management and budgeting, with conservative revenue estimates and scrupulous adherence to State law and the Government Accounting Standards Board standards for government accounting. Much of the credit for Brighton’s strength goes to Finance Director Paula Parker and Deputy Finance Director Suzanne Zaso, who guide our financial planning and budget development. As we develop our 2024-26 Capital Improvement Plan, and subsequently the 2024 Town budget, we will remain vigilant in balancing our fiscal responsibility with quality of life expenditures, in an open and transparent process.

Tonight is not just a night to celebrate our successes. Just as importantly, it is a night to celebrate and acknowledge our Town of Brighton team, who work hard for the people of Brighton every day, as well
as the people who serve our community, as first responders, as volunteers on our community boards and organizations, as leaders in church, synagogue or mosque, as people committed to serving the underserved and as coaches and leaders in youth sports and other youth activities. Local government is the government closest to the people, but it is also the level of government that is often the most stretched for resources, so we cannot thank our volunteers enough. You each help make Brighton a place that people are proud to call home.

Each of our Department Heads leads an effective and responsive organization, providing key government services. First, I want to acknowledge Mike Guyon, who recently retired as Brighton’s Commissioner of Public Works, Highway Superintendent and Sewer Commissioner. Tomorrow night, Mike is being honored at a dinner in Binghamton as NYS Public Works leader of the Year, a well-deserved recognition of his outstanding career in public service.

I have already mentioned Paula Parker and the outstanding results she and her Deputy Suzanne Zaso and the entire Finance Department have achieved in properly and prudently managing the fiscal affairs of the Town.

Town Attorney Ken Gordon, who is also a former member of the Town Board, brings both a legal and governmental perspective to his work. As such he is uniquely able to advise from a legal as well as a governmental perspective. As a former Town Attorney myself and as Supervisor, I know how valuable that role is, and I thank you for your work.

Brighton Police Chief David Catholdi is a well-respected leader in law enforcement, and for good reason. Public safety is a critical concern, but just as important is a proactive commitment to equitable work in law enforcement. Chief Catholdi has been proactive in working in collaboration with and implementing recommendations of groups like the United Christian Leadership Ministries and so many others to ensure the highest level of community police engagement from all levels of the Brighton Police Department.

Since the start of the pandemic, people are spending more time outdoors and for Brighton residents, but also for people living throughout the Rochester area, a great deal of that time has been spent enjoying Town of Brighton parks and trails. Matt Beeman has worked steadily to ensure that our parks system is well maintained and safe. As we purchase more land and construct more trails, the burden on the Parks Department has steadily increased, but Matt and his team are more than up to the challenge.

Earlier this evening we presented a proclamation to the Friends of the Brickyard Trail for the Brickyard Art Exhibit they organized. That exhibit could not have happened without Recreation Director Becky
Cotter, who worked with the organizers on many aspects of the event, in addition to the broad range of Recreation activities that are held each day that fall within Becky’s purview. As we prepare to consider the report of a consultant on the future of recreation and community activities in Brighton, Becky will be at the helm taking on another responsibility, making sure we are well advised and well prepared for the future recreational needs of Brighton. In addition, I believe that Becky is the only person who knows the Brickyard Bunny well enough to make sure the Bunny visits us here in Brighton this time of year!

It is important that the Town Assessor be knowledgeable about property valuation, but it is also vitally important that the Assessor can engage with residents and explain often complicated real estate matters in a way that can easily be understood. Town Assessor Pam Post is relatively new to the position, having come to us from Canandaigua just last year, but I have heard loud and clear that the community appreciates Pam’s willingness to be patient and thorough in working with community members, especially our seniors, to address often complicated property tax exemptions and other issues.

As we all know, without computers, it is nearly impossible for any of us to function. You can make an argument then that our IT Director Jeremy Lutz is the most important person in Town Hall. The IT Department is small but responsive and during the past year has not only led a transition to Windows 365, but also worked with other departments, particularly Public Works and Highway, as they plan and execute important software transitions.

This past year, Gary Donofrio was promoted to the position of Maintenance Mechanic, responsible for a wide range of building and construction issues. Today, Gary is spending a significant amount of time on the Winter Farmers Market project. Looking forward, he will work on significant projects here in Town Hall, and a potential Community Center project will also require his skills.

Jennifer Ries-Taggert is the Executive Director of the beloved Brighton Memorial Library. Many people who never set foot in the rest of Town Hall spend hours each week at the Library, and Jennifer makes sure that the Library is a resource for everyone in the community, young and old, computer savvy or confirmed book reader. The Brighton Memorial Library was voted Best Library in Monroe County and Jennifer is the shining star that leads the way to excellence.

Town Historian Mary Jo Lanphear is a priceless resource on all things related to Brighton’s history. When we need information on historic properties in Brighton, Mary Jo is the source, but she was also the person I turned to when I wanted to address my concern with the murals in the front lobby of Town Hall and whether they accurately depicted our first residents, the Onödowá’ga.
Lisa Pavlovych administers the Town Court, which generates so many records and makes important decisions in the lives of people. Her attention to detail and working relationships with our judges, our staff and the public at large is vital to the smooth operations of the Court.

Speaking of our Judges, Judge Karen Morris and Judge Jon Falk are leaders in the legal community as well as on the bench. Brighton’s tradition of judicial excellence is well deserved, and dates back to such noted Town Justices as Judge Jim Morris and Judge John Ark. This year, after 29 years, we are sad to learn that Judge Karen Morris has made the decision that she will retire. She will be rightly recognized and celebrated for her work.

Town Clerk and Receiver of Taxes Dan Aman is the Town Hall record keeper but he also functions as sort of an ombudsman. If anyone has a really tough question, take it to Dan, and the odds are he will have an answer. So many residents walk through the door of the Town Clerk each day and Dan and his amazing team respond to their needs. Thank you Dan for being the glue that keeps us all together.

Finally my colleagues on the Town Board: Jason DiPonzio, Chris Werner, Robin Wilt and Christine Corrado. Each of you are engaged in many aspects of Town government and each week you participate in meetings of the Town Board or Town Board committees. You have the best interest of residents at heart, and you do your homework so you are ready to make the tough decisions that come with elected office.

Assistant to the Supervisor Bridget Monroe runs the Supervisor’s Office and is the primary point of contact for people and organizations that wish to meet with the Supervisor, hold special events or have some other particular need relating to Town government. She has worked closely staffing the IDEA Board since its establishment in 2019, and also organizes many Town special events and media opportunities. Bridget also continues to be the primary point of contact for people with concerns about their RG&E bills and customer service issues.

This is an exciting time in Brighton, but the reality is that we cannot always anticipate the challenges or opportunities that we face. I will always try to make myself available to you, the residents of Brighton, whether you stop into my office, or even better, when you stop me on the Brickyard Trail. Together we will continue to make Brighton a special place to call home; a community of diverse neighborhoods, committed to education, sustainability and an optimistic vision for tomorrow. Today, the State of the Town of Brighton is strong and with our plans for dealing with a complex and challenging future, Brighton will remain strong. It is a privilege and an honor to serve you and this great community as your Town Supervisor. Thank you.