



Waterbury Regional Chamber  
*driving business to business*

# Waterbury Mayoral Evaluation



**Administration of Mayor Neil M. O'Leary, 2017**



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## 2017 Waterbury Mayoral Evaluation

The Waterbury Regional Chamber is committed to the future of Waterbury as a premier place to live and work. Mayor Neil M. O'Leary was elected to a third term in November 2015, the first Waterbury mayor elected to a four-year term. A primary focus of his administration continues to be economic development and increasing the Grand List, and significant progress has been made. While we expect Mayor O'Leary and his administration to continue to build upon these successes, we share this evaluation to document his efforts toward meeting the business community's priorities.

**Note:** *"Exceeds Expectations" does not imply that Chamber members believe work on a topic is completed; "Meets Expectations" does not imply that substantial work has not been done to address an issue.*

# 2017 Waterbury Mayoral Evaluation at a Glance

## Business Agenda Items

### Fiscal Control & City Management

Exceeds Expectations

Meets Expectations

Needs Improvement

1. Maintaining fiscal stability & accountability; working to reduce tax rate (*see page 2*)



2. Addressing pensions liabilities (*see page 2*)



### Economic Development

1. Making city more attractive for private investment/business relocation; retain businesses (*see page 3*)



2. Recognizing vital role of Downtown Waterbury (*see page 3*)



3. Working to redevelop brownfields (*see page 4*)



4. Supporting workforce training (*see page 4*)



5. Reducing city's unemployment rate (*see page 5*)



6. Finding a solution to relocating the transit bus pulse point away from the Green (*see page 5*)



7. Continuing to support efforts to market the city (*see page 6*)



### Quality of life

1. Rigorously addressing blight & vagrancy (*see page 6*)



2. Promoting community spirit (*see page 7*)



### Education

1. Working to improve public school system (*see page 7*)



# Fiscal Control and City Management

**1.** Maintaining fiscal stability and accountability through sound financial management, while working to reduce the city's tax rate.

**Rating:** *Meets Expectations*

**Current Status:** The city has an A+ bond rating, and during the Mayor's five years in office budget increases averaged 1.41%, below the 2.5% statewide average. The current budget increased 3.5 percent, primarily due to cuts in state aid. The tax rate rose from 41.82 mills to 60.21 mills (+18.39 mills), a rate second only to the City of Hartford's. It should be noted that a majority of the increase (15.17 mills) resulted from property revaluation in 2012, and that the 44% increase since 2011 is comparable to increases in New Britain (45.7%) and Stamford (46%) but larger than increases in Bridgeport (32%), Hartford (unchanged) and New Haven (6.9%).

**Recommended Future Action:** Remain committed to implementing fiscal responsibility measures to stabilize taxes and mitigate the impact of potential future state budget cuts. Continue to prioritize promoting economic development to increase the Grand List and reduce the tax rate.

**2.** Addressing the impact pension liability has on city finances.

**Rating:** *Meets Expectations*

**Current Status:** The cost of unfunded pension obligations and other post-employment benefits remains high to very high, according to Fitch Ratings. The Mayor's administration has taken steps to control and/or reduce post-retirement benefit costs, including the recent arbitration victory vs. the police union, which prevented a \$38 million increase to the city's pension liability.



**Recommended Future Action:** Continue making progress toward reducing these liabilities, while standing firm against union efforts to increase pension benefits.

## Economic Development

**1.** Making Waterbury more attractive for private investment and business relocation to the city while retaining businesses here is a key component in the city's economic recovery.

**Rating:** *Exceeds Expectations*

**Current Status:** Since taking office in 2011, a net 48 businesses have opened in the city and another 10 have expanded, adding a net of more than 1,800 jobs and more than \$1.9 million in tax revenue. Another eight businesses are constructing facilities and are projected to bring in another 550 jobs.

**Recommended Future Action:** Continue to actively partner with state and federal officials, the Chamber, business community, Waterbury Development Corporation (WDC) and Main Street Waterbury to foster targeted economic development initiatives.

**2.** Recognizing that Downtown Waterbury and adjacent areas play a vital role in the strength of outlying areas.

**Rating:** *Meets Expectations*

**Current Status:** The \$14.4 million federal TIGER Grant is being used to accelerate redevelopment of properties around the city's train station, river corridor neighborhoods and downtown areas. Work has begun on renovating the Green; on the Freight Street Transportation Oriented Design project, and on developing student housing near the University



of Connecticut-Waterbury. Gov. Malloy committed \$12.2 million for downtown redevelopment, and the façade improvement program administered by WDC and Main St. Waterbury continues. The Howland Hughes building still lacks a major tenant and remains largely empty.

**Recommended Future Action:** Actively seek new funding opportunities for additional downtown projects that improve the quality of life and business activity; determine a best use for the historic Rose Hill property and step up efforts to assist in marketing the Howland Hughes building and other vacant downtown storefronts.

**3.** Working with the Waterbury Development Corp. and state and federal programs for redeveloping brownfields.

**Rating:** *Exceeds Expectations*

**Current Status:** Since 2011, the Mayor's administration has worked to help developers reclaim more than 20 former brownfields, with more projects underway, and identified others for future remediation. The city acquired the former Risdon site and may set up a separate entity to acquire the Anamet site to help facilitate remediation and redevelopment. The Mayor was honored in 2016 with an environmental merit award from the federal Environmental Protection Agency.

**Recommended Future Action:** Continue to actively seek new federal and state funding opportunities for additional brownfields remediation projects; support state legislation creating brownfields land banks.

**4.** Supporting the efforts of the Northwest Regional Workforce Investment Board and local colleges to meet the workforce training needs of local businesses.

**Rating:** *Exceeds Expectations*

**Current Status:** The Mayor continues to strongly support the board's



efforts, including Gov. Dannel Malloy's Second Chance Society effort, which funded manufacturing training in the city for former inmates.

**Recommended Future Action:** Actively seek new federal and state funding for workforce training programs.

## **5.** Reducing the city's unemployment rate.

**Rating:** *Exceeds Expectations*

**Current Status:** The city's unemployment rate has dropped during the Mayor's tenure, from 13.5% in December 2011 to 6.3% in November 2016 (latest figure available), while the labor force fell by just 500 workers, indicating a significant job gain. The rate remains the state's second-highest, well above the statewide rate of 4.5%.

**Recommended Future Action:** Continue to make business development and job creation a priority, while supporting training and retraining programs provided by the workforce investment board, community college and trade schools.

## **6.** Finding a solution to relocating the transit bus pulse point away from the Green.

**Rating:** *Needs Improvement\**

**Current Status:** The Chamber acknowledges the Mayor's past efforts in pursuing a solution to this divisive issue, and that obstacles to a long-term solution exist, including the potential cost to the state. The 2013 demolition of the former SNET building provided opportunities to upgrade the Meadow Street Metro-North Rail facilities, but a proposal to create a multimodal transportation center remains unfulfilled, as does the relocation of the pulse point from the Green. Chamber members feel strongly that a solution must be found to relocate the pulse point in order to maximize and enhance the renovation of the Green.





**Recommended Future Action:** The Mayor should make the problem of the buses around the Green a higher priority for his administration, and work with the state Department of Transportation, the Naugatuck Valley Council of Governments, Northeast Transportation, the Waterbury Regional Chamber, other organizations as deemed appropriate, and, if necessary, the governor's office to resolve the issue.

**7.** Continuing to support efforts to present the city to external target markets that enhance Waterbury's image and facilitate economic development initiatives.

**Rating:** *Meets Expectations*

**Current Status:** The O'Leary administration continues to partner with the Chamber in a City Marketing/Public Relations "Waterbury Be Here" campaign that began in 2013; an updated video was released and posted online in spring 2015.

**Recommended Future Action:** Continue the update the "Waterbury Be Here" campaign, which has been recognized as a factor by companies considering relocation to the city; build upon the strong collaborative working relationships with the Chamber and the WDC to advance new economic development initiatives

## Quality of Life

**1.** Rigorously enforcing provisions to address blight and vagrancy.

**Rating:** *Exceeds Expectations*

**Current Status:** The Mayor's administration has worked with the WDC and Police Department to spearhead efforts to address blight issues throughout the city. During the Mayor's tenure, the city acquired 72





blighted properties and demolished 94 buildings, as well as the Prospect Street garage. Also, 27 officers have been added to the police force and downtown foot patrols have been reinstated, improving security. The department also relocated a community relations division to a renovated building on Pine Street.

**Recommended Future Action:** Continue efforts against blight; in addition to increased patrols, consider an ordinance or other methods to combat vagrancy.

## 2. Promoting community spirit.

**Rating:** *Exceeds Expectations*

**Current Status:** The Mayor has been highly visible and accessible to the community, consistently attending public functions and festivals, as well as hosting a monthly call-in show on WATR-AM 1320. His efforts to acquire and renovate Holy Land have been well received, demonstrated by the level of public donations. The Mayor has used the property as the launching site for Fourth of July fireworks, which the public also has embraced.

**Recommended Future Action:** The Mayor should continue to build upon these efforts to promote community spirit.

# Education

The Waterbury Regional Chamber recognizes that education plays a major role in the city's economic well-being and quality of life. Apart from the intrinsic benefits of creating opportunities for students, improving the public schools helps maintain property values, retains and attracts residents committed to enhancing education, and supports business investment and growth in Waterbury through a skilled and ready workforce.



**1.** A viable public school system is a critical component of economic growth and development. Public education is also a significant component of the city budget.

**Rating:** *Meets Expectations*

**Current Status:** In his role with the Connecticut Conference of Municipalities, the Mayor has been an outspoken critic of the state's Education Cost Sharing formula. He also has worked to identify waste in the school budget and bring it to the attention of school administrators. The Mayor also continues to seek solutions, both public and private, for school overcrowding and building upgrades.

**Recommended Future Action:** Continue to provide input into the education system where appropriate to ensure follow-through in reaching goals.



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