

SUNDAY CONVERSATION

# W-B mayor touts team's achievements

*In conversation, George Brown says he will seek second term as mayor.*

Wilkes-Barre Mayor George Brown was born and raised in the city, went to Meyers High School as well as King's College and Misericordia University. After retiring, he served on the city council and was elected mayor in 2020. He recently spoke to the Times-Shamrock's News Engine podcast. These excerpts have been edited for space, but the entire interview can be heard at citizensvoice.com/blogs/news\_engine.

**NE:** Was there any one thing that made you decide to run for council and eventually mayor?

**GB:** I saw the way the city was going. I knew the city could come back and my thought was to run the city like a business, which is my background. And it's been working out that way. We're reducing expenses and the city is on its way back. But the reason I ran for mayor was to bring our city back to greatness. So with a great team I work with we are doing some wonderful things in the city.

**NE:** I know that you take quality of life issues very seriously. And you've got some unique approaches to what the average person might think are fairly simple, everyday occurrences. Things like the garbage fee or parking fee, but also rent for businesses. Could you tell us a little bit about the plan that you came up with?

**GB:** Wilkes-Barre received \$37.1 million from (the) American Rescue Plan from the federal government. And we're very appreciative of that. But we sat down, my team and I, and we said we want to see how we can help the low income people, the people that were hurt during this COVID situation (and) came up with Mayor Brown's nine-point plan. First thing we did was we reduced parking meters in the city from \$2 an hour to \$1. That was also to help the businesses downtown and other places where there are meters. We also reduced the cost of garbage collections from \$13 to \$10 for a package of five garbage bags.

Larger things we did was we mailed out 8,400 \$300 stimulus checks to the needy based on income level. We took a million dollars and I gave a million dollars to 24 social agencies located in the city of Wilkes-Barre, and that's to help the needy, to help the homeless, to help the people that don't have food to eat and to also get people help, whatever they need through those social agencies. Another thing that we did was, if you want to open up and folks, I wanted to put this out there if you want to open up a new business, in the city of Wilkes-Barre, we're going to pay your rent for the first year.

**NE:** You're going to pay the new businesses rent?

**GB:** It's called the Spark program. And we pay your first year up to \$10,000. Now, unless it's a major business that comes in with multiple employees. They may get up to \$50,000 for the first year. Yes, so the normal businesses that come in \$10,000. But we also help you through the Wyoming Valley Chamber of Commerce to show you how to start up a business, how to progress through that process of starting a business and becoming successful. But the key here is, yes, I've dedicated a million dollars to that effort.



THE CITIZENS' VOICE FILE

Wilkes-Barre City Mayor George Brown talks to the crowd from the stage on Public Square during the city's second annual Oktoberfest earlier this month.

**NE:** Are any of the other cities doing anything like that, that you're aware of?

**GB:** No, not that I'm aware of. This is a plan that we put together. We devised it. So we're the only ones that have it. But to answer your question, we have 50 new businesses starting up in Wilkes-Barre this year. Also what we're doing is if you own a house in the city of Wilkes-Barre, your primary residence and based on income, if you need repairs for your house, we're going to pay \$7,500 of those repairs.

**NE:** There was a really bad couple of months it seemed where there were shooting after shooting, but things have improved.

**GB:** Yeah, those situations have been addressed. We've also done some things that we've utilized American Rescue Plan money for. Each officer now has body cams. I purchased 10 new police vehicles. We purchased two ATVs to patrol the parks. Every officer is getting a new firearm. We're also buying 10 bicycles. And we're putting 10 officers on bicycles in the neighborhood.

**NE:** I wanted to ask you about that because if I remember correctly, this is going way back maybe into the 80s. Wilkes-Barre was one of the first cities to use bike patrol. So they're coming back?

**GB:** We are bringing them back. As a matter of fact, officers have approached me and said, 'Mayor, I heard what you want to do with the bicycles. Sign me up.'

**NE:** Before you took office. One of the issues that I believe you spoke about was the homeless problem in the city. What have you done so far about that? And what's the plan?

**GB:** We started the Code Blue program, where if the weather gets cold enough, the mayor's office declares a Code Blue emergency, and we have a place for homeless people to go so that they get warm, they get shelter, they get food. We're also opening up, and this is in the planning stages, a place for people to go that are homeless, that from eight o'clock in the morning until six o'clock at night, they have a place to go (that) is going to be air conditioned, it's going to be heated, there'll be shower facilities, there'll be places for them to stay. We're working with the Keystone mission. Right now Keystone mission houses 14 homeless men. We're working with those people to provide (shelter) and also training.

**NE:** How about an update on the hotel and conference Center?

**GB:** We're in the final stages of financing for that. If

you went by the site, the former Sterling site, you'll see a sign up and actually shows the drawing of what it's going to look like. It's gonna be a beautiful building. It will have a convention center inside, a restaurant and glass front. We're building another hotel on Northampton Street, which will also be a five-story hotel. We're going to be building a second hotel. We're building a special needs park. This is the all inclusive park. We call it all inclusive, because it's special needs but also people that are not special needs can use it.

When I became mayor, I put a committee together of people that have special needs children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, so they live it every day. And also people that work in that business, servicing special needs people. Our goal was to raise \$400,000 to build a special needs park in Kirby Park. Well, I'm happy to say that within a year's time, we raised \$521,000. One hundred percent voluntary donations have paid for that park. The park is complete. It's beautiful.

We're also building a skateboard park and that's going to be at Hollenbeck Park. It's going to be a beautiful skateboard park for scooters, BMX bikes and skateboards. And people can come to Wilkes-Barre and take part in competitions. The third thing we're doing is rebuilding

a wooden deck hockey rink. And that's at the Toyota complex on Coal Street. The Pittsburgh Penguins helped us to subsidize the cost of that. That's almost complete now.

We're also building a brand new stage on Public Square. We have (an) ice skating rink that we're enlarging on Public Square.

**NE:** Is Wilkes-Barre still a safe, affordable place to raise a family?

**GB:** Absolutely. And as I said, our crime rate has been dropping. We are seeing an influx of new people coming into Wilkes-Barre. We have a very large Latino population, a large African American population, but also a very diverse population of other minorities that are coming in. And I love it because when we just had our multicultural parade, we saw the different diversities, the different groups that are very proud to represent their home countries.

**NE:** Is it too soon to talk about you running again? Are you there yet?

**GB:** In January, we'll start our reelection campaign. Yeah, my effort is to put another four years in and get the city where the next mayor, he or she, can come in and continue the growth. At my age, I want to do one more term. So if I'm lucky enough to get reelected by the voters, I want one more term.



SEAN MCKEAG / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Military personnel saluting during Saturday's POW-MIA flag retirement ceremony are, from left, retired Air Force veteran Col. Donna Smith, Navy veteran Lt. Cmdr. Stacey Acri, Marine Corps veteran Cpt. Shannon Falcheck and retired Army Lt. Col. Mary Ann Aigeldinger.



SEAN MCKEAG / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Acri and Falcheck fold the retired POW-MIA flag during the ceremony outside Mohegan Sun Arena at Casey Plaza in Wilkes-Barre Twp. on Saturday.

## Mohegan Sun Arena flies new POW/MIA flag

*Flag honors nation's captured, missing.*

**BY BOB KALINOWSKI**  
STAFF WRITER

WILKES-BARRE TWP. — A new POW/MIA flag is flying at the entrance of the Mohegan Sun Arena following a retirement and replacement ceremony Saturday.

Veterans, members of a women's group and U.S. Rep. Matt Cartwright gathered for the event.

"Today we gather here to honor those patriots who went missing in action or were taken prisoner of war," said Cartwright, D-8, Moosic. "The uncertainty and pain of the unaccounted for is excruciating. But today and every day we see that flag we can feel some peace in knowing the search for the missing does not stop until they are brought home."

Officials with the arena had planned to hold the ceremony around the time the COVID-19 pandemic emerged

in 2020. A tattered POW/MIA flag was replaced at the time with a temporary one that flew until a better quality flag replaced it on Saturday.

The American Legion Riders motorcycle club from Post 781 in Mountain Top served as the honor guard Saturday.

The Mountain Top chapter of the General Federation of Women's Club organized the ceremony.

"We are here to honor those who served who were not able to return home," said Gaylene Hunter, co-president of the women's club.

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