



Ben Walsh was sworn in as the 54th mayor of Syracuse in January 2018, leading a postindustrial metropolis that, like many, has struggled with job and population loss. The 37 year-old, who helped establish the Greater Syracuse Land Bank and redevelop the Hotel Syracuse, is known for a pragmatic and creative approach to urban planning.

Prior to becoming mayor—a job held by his grandfather—he was the city’s deputy commissioner of neighborhood and business development. He also held positions at the Metropolitan Development Association and the private firm Mackenzie Hughes LLP. He has a Master’s degree in public administration from the Maxwell School at Syracuse University. He resides on the city’s west side with his wife, Lindsay, and his two daughters. He was interviewed by Lincoln Institute Fellow Anthony Flint.

## Syracuse Endorses the Value of Its Legacy

**ANTHONY FLINT:** You were born into a political family—your grandfather was mayor and Congressman, and your father was also elected to Congress—but you took some time before running yourself. What finally prompted you to want to be chief executive?

**BEN WALSH:** It’s the public service that is important. I admired my dad’s ability to see politics as a means to an end. I was never confident in my own ability to strike that balance. But ultimately, when I came to work for the city [under the previous mayor, Stephanie Miner], I started to consider running for office.

**AF:** In your first weeks on the job, what would you describe as the biggest challenge, and the biggest promise, in leading a legacy city such as Syracuse?

**BW:** We have a structural deficit, anticipating a \$20 million [shortfall] this year. The good news is we have built up a good funds balance over the years. The bad news is we are drawing down on it. But that’s balanced by all the ingredients that Syracuse has to be a vibrant city. I look at the trends and where young people want to be, and we can offer them urban amenities, proximity to work, density, and walkability.

**AF:** According to our recent report *Revitalizing America’s Smaller Legacy Cities*, many post-industrial cities have a strong tradition of foundations, other nonprofits, and “eds and meds,” or anchor institutions. What kind of partnerships are you developing?

**BW:** We actually don’t have a large philanthropic base. We have local foundations, but they’re on the smaller side. It’s a blessing and curse of our industrial legacy. We never relied on one industry or company, so we never went as high but also didn’t go so low. Eds and meds are a significant part of the city. One of the highest concentrations of colleges and universities is in this region. Three great hospitals [are] major employers. St. Joseph’s Hospital has very intentionally grown in a way that supports the neighborhood around it. Same for Syracuse University. We would like to be doing a better job of commercializing the technology that comes out of those institutions. If you look at our legacy institutions, [they have] a foundation of knowledge and expertise to create new companies and industries. . . . We see a lot of companies in the UA (unmanned aerial) space based on radar technologies going back to General Electric. With Carrier, though the manufacturing is gone, they have maintained R&D, and some great work is being done on indoor air quality technologies.

**AF:** Syracuse made a bid for Amazon HQ2. Did you learn anything from that process about Syracuse’s assets or shortcomings?

**BW:** It forces the region to work together and collaborate and prepares us for future, perhaps more realistic, opportunities. We’ve seen our fair share of hard times over the years, and I think it has made us a risk-averse community. I liked the way we thought outside the box.

**AF:** Another important element for many regenerating legacy cities has to do with history and a sense of place. What are the urban “bones” of the city that give Syracuse a competitive advantage in this regard?

**BW:** When you look at the renaissance of our urban core, it’s the adaptive reuse of our industrial and historic building stock. People are looking for that sense of place, that authenticity. It’s real. We’re not trying to recreate a Main Street. We’ve used both federal and New York state historic tax credits. It has been a major driver of our redevelopment.

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Mayor Walsh advocates replacing the elevated section of Interstate 81 running through Syracuse with a ground-level transition into the city’s street grid. Credit: City of Syracuse.

When you look more broadly [at] the importance of history here, a few things come to mind— [the Syracuse region was] the birthplace of the Iroquois confederacy, an important stop on the Underground Railroad, the birthplace of the women’s suffrage movement, the hub of the salt industry. We’re embracing that history.

**AF: Can you tell us about your interest and experience in land banking, and how that might translate to more equitable development?**

**BW:** We saw it as an opportunity, first of all, to help the city be more effective in collecting taxes. We made a policy decision in the past not to foreclose on delinquent properties, and that created an environment where there wasn’t any accountability. Properties were falling vacant. We also wanted to be more intentional in how we dealt with these vacant lots, not as liabilities but as assets. What we had been doing was selling tax liens. We realized we owned the problem regardless. We passed state legislation to create a city-county land bank. We have built up a sizeable inventory of properties and have sold over 500 to date. Now we turn to more equitable development. We favor selling to [homeowners], and we’re enabling affordable housing development using low-income tax credits. The first step was getting our arms around the problem, and now we’re looking at planning processes.

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**AF: The era of urban renewal took a particular toll on cities like Syracuse. How important is the proposed dismantling of the Interstate 81 viaduct through downtown, and what can be done to make that project become reality soon?**

**BW:** I’ve been a vocal proponent of removing the elevated portion of I-81 in favor of the community grid option. We have existing infrastructure to reroute through-traffic around the city and accommodate traffic coming into the city through an enhanced street grid. There are primarily suburban interests that understandably see any alteration of the existing conditions as a threat. At the [state level], it’s taking longer than anyone expected. We’re waiting on a draft EIS (Environmental Impact Statement). [The options include] replacing the viaduct, which would require it to be higher and wider, and a tunnel option. We’re talking a difference in billions. The community grid option comes in at \$1.3 billion; the least expensive tunnel option is \$3.2 to \$4.5 billion, and goes up from there. That’s a pretty big difference for a mile and a half stretch. Even if we could afford to build the tunnel, we don’t need it. Eighty percent of the traffic already comes into the existing grid. It’s just bottlenecked at a couple of off ramps. This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to right a past wrong.

**AF: Not every city can be a tech hub alternative to Silicon Valley. What is it about Syracuse that could create a niche?**

**BW:** We can’t compete in every arena, so we identify where we have core competencies, like indoor air quality and unmanned aerial systems. I believe we’re the only city in the country where you’ll be able to test drones beyond line of sight.

**AF: What will it take to get younger people to stay in Syracuse? Do you have a target population size in mind?**

**BW:** I don’t have a target in mind. For decades, we lost population. The first step is stabilizing. We’ve done that, and we’re right around 140,000. When we peaked as a population, we didn’t have the suburban sprawl we have today. The region remained stable as we were losing [downtown residents], as people moved to the suburbs. Now when you look at the national trends, the city is what young people are looking for. ☐