

Speech for the Monessen Town Hall on Economic Development

Good evening, friends, neighbors, and proud residents who are watching on YouTube and social media for all those living in Monessen,

Tonight, we gather not just to discuss challenges but to seize opportunities. We're here to shape a brighter future for our town—a future we all deserve and a future that begins with each one of us.

Monessen has a proud history. We've been a town of steel and strength, of hard work and resilience. The hands of our community helped build this country, and that same grit still runs deep in all of us. But let's face it: the challenges of recent decades have tested us. Like so many towns across America, we've felt the sting of economic shifts, population changes, and industries leaving behind gaps in opportunity. Yet, we've also seen sparks of hope—small businesses finding their footing, new faces bringing fresh ideas, and community leaders who never stop believing in what Monessen can be.

Let's make one thing clear: Monessen's best days are *not* behind us. They're ahead of us. The road to economic revitalization is not a mystery. It's hard work, yes, but it's also a journey fueled by collaboration, creativity, and the belief that our community is worth investing in. And here's the good news: we already have what it takes.

Our county commissioners understand this. They have formed community groups in various sections of the county for the express purpose of finding ways to make the communities better and thus the county.

The County has invested heavily in the removal of blight from our neighborhoods, the Westmoreland Land Bank is working with the city to find ways of redeveloping after the blight is removed. One such way we are working together is through Westmoreland Community Action who operates as a non-profit and is offering solutions including the necessities of food, financial aid, and housing.

Step 1: Building Together through the Comprehensive Plan 2030

One of the most important tools we have to shape Monessen's future is the *Comprehensive Plan 2030*. This plan was developed through extensive collaboration with the public in 2020 and formally adopted by the council in 2021. It's not just a set of ideas; it's a detailed vision for Monessen's future, built from the ground up, based on what *you*—the residents of this community—want to see happen.

The *Comprehensive Plan 2030* addresses everything from economic growth to infrastructure, housing, and quality of life. It's a roadmap, showing us where we want to go as a community and how we can get there together. Most importantly, this plan reflects your voices, your hopes, and your goals for Monessen. The work we are doing tonight, and every day, is rooted in the foundation laid by that vision.

Step 2: Progress Through Strategic Investments

In addition to the *Comprehensive Plan 2030*, we've been blessed with tangible support to turn our vision into action. Recently, Monessen was awarded a \$75,000 Local Share Account (LSA) grant,

earmarked for the development of our downtown corridor—specifically, the section of Donner Avenue between 5th and 6th Street.

This grant is not just a number on paper. It's an investment in Monessen's heart and soul. These funds will allow us to create a strategy to revitalize our downtown in a way that entices investment, draws businesses that benefit the city, and fosters long-term economic growth. By developing a plan that transforms this vital area into a vibrant, inviting space, we're not just enhancing our city's image—we're paving the way for new opportunities and partnerships.

This funding is also a rallying cry to gather additional support and resources, showing investors and stakeholders that Monessen is serious about growth and ready to make bold moves.

Step 3: Amplifying Opportunities with the Neighborhood Partnership Program

Another exciting initiative underway is the *Neighborhood Partnership Program* (NPP), a transformative opportunity that invites businesses with state tax obligations in excess of \$50,000 to reinvest in our community. Through this program, businesses can work with a committee of local stakeholders—including business owners, educators, religious, and elected leaders—to direct their contributions toward meaningful projects and programs that directly benefit Monessen.

Here's the incredible part: participating businesses receive a *90% state tax credit* in return for their investment. This means they can fulfill their state tax obligations while directly supporting a program that will revitalize our community. And for Monessen? The benefit is immense. This program is projected to bring in some \$3 million to fuel projects that create jobs, improve infrastructure, support local schools, and enhance our quality of life.

The *Neighborhood Partnership Program* is more than a financial tool—it's a partnership between local businesses, educators, and leaders to shape Monessen's future in a way that benefits everyone. It's a win-win for the businesses who participate and for the residents of this great city.

Step 4: Learning from Successful Communities

Monessen is not alone in this journey. Across Pennsylvania and beyond, other communities have faced challenges similar to ours and found ways to overcome them by coming together with vision, determination, and teamwork.

Take Irwin, for example. Years ago, the heart of their downtown—a beloved theater called the *Lamp Theater*—was destroyed by fire. It would have been easy to write it off as a loss. But instead, the citizens of Irwin came together and said, "We can rebuild." They formed a nonprofit, raised funds, and invested their time, energy, and hard-earned dollars into a vision they believed in.

It took 10 years of dedication, but today, the *Lamp Theater* not only stands rebuilt—it thrives. It hosts performances and events several times a week, drawing visitors from all over the region. What's more,

the theater became a catalyst for the entire downtown district, sparking new life into local businesses, restaurants, and shops.

Another example is New Kensington, where an *NPP program* brought together local citizens, businesses, and leaders to rehabilitate an aging neighborhood. Their efforts sparked a success story when *Voodoo Distillery* took over a rehabilitated building, creating jobs and bringing new visitors to the area. This success attracted more investment—additional distilleries, restaurants, and boutique shops followed. Today, New Kensington’s streets are alive with activity, including street festivals nearly every weekend in the summer months. This transformation didn’t happen overnight. It happened because people worked together with a shared vision for their city’s future.

Step 5: Believing in Ourselves and Working Together

Here’s the truth: any vision for Monessen—no matter how bold or well-crafted—requires all of us to work together to make it succeed.

If this vision isn’t exactly what you had in mind, but you see even a sliver of hope, I urge you to invest yourself in it. Help shape it. Promote it. Bring your voice to the table and work with us to create something great.

If, however, you truly cannot see a path forward, then I ask you to step back and let those of us who do see hope carry the burden. But if you have any optimism—if you believe even a little that Monessen’s future can be brighter—then stand with us. Say, “*I want a better future.*”

Our vision isn’t perfect, and there’s no magic switch to make it happen overnight. What it is, though, is a starting point—a foundation that can evolve as we work together.

Closing: The Time is Now

For too long, Monessen has been defined by the challenges of its past. But now, it’s time to build a new future. The *Comprehensive Plan 2030* is our foundation. The LSA grant and the *Neighborhood Partnership Program* are tools to turn ideas into action. And the examples of Irwin and New Kensington show us what’s possible when a community comes together.

We have investors knocking at our door, this past week I attended a meeting in Greensburg with our county commissioners and congressmen representing us. This meeting was an introduction to entrepreneurs Mike Slavic and Bob Nix who are interested in building a gated senior citizen center for middle to upper class retirees. This upscale, for profit concept has the prospects of establishing a prosperous future bringing into town folks from all over western PA while increasing our tax base.

We have diligently worked on cleaning up our infrastructure. With the investment into our storm drains as part of Phased 3 and Phase 4 satisfying our DEP mandated decree, we have addressed many of our concerns and reduced the number of sewer failures we had suffered giving life back to our city.

To this we add some various examples of what we perceive as mine subsidence as is evident on Summit Ave near 14th street. Not only are the homes in the area suffering but it is clear that the city is involved as well. Sidewalks and streets in the area have shown signs of movement. In a meeting with Javin Alvi of Geo Mechanics, a well recognized expert in mine subsidence, a plan was defined. After the first of the year, it is my goal to invite county commissioners, senators, and representatives to a meeting in an effort to increase awareness of a very real problem that affects the city.

This is our moment to act. It's our chance to create a Monessen where businesses thrive, families prosper, and our streets are filled with hope and opportunity. Together, we can turn our city into a model of success for the entire Mon Valley.

Invest some time where your heart leads you, we have opportunities at the civic center, civic organizations like the lions club and rotary club, reforming the chamber of commerce, and don't forget, spring time is when you need to search your soul and determine if perhaps there is a political future for yourself. Please get involved in an effort that provides something for Monessen.

Let's prove that Monessen is not defined by its challenges, but by the strength and determination of its people.

Let's get to work.

Thank you.