



**SENATE COMMITTEE ON URBAN AFFAIRS & HOUSING
HEARING – MAY 29, COUNTY COURTHOUSE, GOLD ROOM**

(THERE WILL BE 3 MAYORS ON YOUR PANEL: DUQUESNE MAYOR, NEW KENSINGTON MAYOR & YOU)

You are asked to speak for 5-10 minutes

TOPICS:

1. What your city is going through
2. Where your city is headed
3. What do you need (Money!)
4. Projects you'd like to see (Demolition, Elm Street, Main Street, programs that are no longer funded by the state)
5. How the state can help your city

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, and guests it is my honor and privilege to speak with you today. My name is Mike Cherepko and I am proud to be mayor of the City of McKeesport.

McKeesport was once a thriving city built on the foundation of steel. However, the collapse of the steel industry started a rapid decrease in population as workers moved away in search of gainful employment.

There are still many great, dedicated people living in the city who share my vision of "Working Together for a Better McKeesport". I grew up in McKeesport, went on to Penn State University to become a teacher, taught in the McKeesport Area School District for 12 years, and decided that I wanted to do something to help the city that I love.

I've been Mayor for almost a year and a half now and I know that there are so many residents who want to see McKeesport flourish again. In order for us to thrive, we need assistance from the state. We can recover and we will.

We don't need a hand out; we simply need a hand up.

McKeesport has been mentioned on too many news broadcasts that accentuate the negative. Those of us who live there know that this portrait is flawed and paints the wrong vision for what McKeesport is, and where we want to go.

Our intention is to remain focused on the positive. Most people in the Pittsburgh area aren't aware of what is going on in the Mon Valley. For example, we recently held a fundraiser for the wife of one of our city firefighters in which the entire community and surrounding areas came out in support. It was heart-warming to see generations of McKeesporters and people from the surrounding communities come out to help one of our citizens who is facing such a rough road ahead.

That is only one example of good works and there are many, many more. The city is made up of good-hearted people. However, we are going through very tough times financially.

The unemployment rate is higher in this area than most, which leads to our increase in crime and violence. I have every intention to break the community of this addiction to crime and violence, but we need your help.

We need to eliminate the blight that plagues our community and we need financial assistance to do it. We need jobs and support for our local police. We need to find housing funds and build on our economic niche.

Many programs that the state has funded in the past are not available now. I understand that times are tough and that we all had to tighten our belts, but so many people rely on these programs just to get by, and our city greatly relies on them to keep us functioning and improving. The dollars that go into key programs that help cities are critical. They are not a waste.

The city does the best it can with demolition of blighted properties but the costs are staggering.

It is imperative that we continue to rid the city of these buildings in order to begin to revitalize.

Blight invites criminal and drug activity while decreasing the value of any/all structures in the vicinity. I would love to see all of these structures demolished and the neighbors in these areas either purchase the empty lots or even just maintain the lots while they're maintaining their own properties. What a better place the city would be.

We've received state monies in the past for projects such as demolition, Elm Street and Main Street. These programs helped enhance our city, and we could and would very much like to benefit from them again.

There is no doubt that the future of McKeesport can be a bright one, however it is imperative that we receive monetary support and reap the benefits from the state offered programs. I can guarantee with my administration that we exhaust all possibilities when it comes to improving and maintaining our city.

We are not just simply looking for handouts. We are asking that the state provide us with necessary funds that will be used in the most effective and efficient manner to revitalize the City of McKeesport.

In addition to blight reduction, we need funds to create jobs. We need resources to support our police; we need to focus on returning small Third Class cities to vibrancy.

With strong state support, we can grow our way out of the economic challenges that we face. Our community has leaders in the public and private sectors; business, labor, government and academia -- men and women with a vision for this community -- who will come together to rebuild.

We have a workforce that is well-trained and educated and looking for opportunity. We have a spirit that has helped maintain us through tough fiscal times as we have avoided bankruptcy.

There are many good things happening in the city. We have regained manufacturing from the new shale industry. We have maintained quality schools. Businesses are beginning to look at us again.

We can't stop now. That's where you and the state can step in. During the budget consideration and for the remainder of this session, remember that McKeesport is like many economically hard-hit areas. We are going to rebound and we are going to be strong again.

Don't lose faith in us. Don't lose focus on helping us. We can rebuild and we will.

I am pleased that the Urban Affairs and Housing Committee is examining issues dealing with our Third Class Cities and I am pleased to share my thoughts with you. I am hopeful that you will finish your examination and resolve to help us with blight, police protection, economic development, housing and community support issues.

We do not need a hand out. We need a hand up.

I can't thank you enough for the opportunity and I am pleased to answer any questions that you may have.

Thank you.