

Speech to Newton Interfaith Clergy Association

Nov. 7, 2020

Three years ago, when I took the oath of office to become Newton's first female Mayor, I said that while we were living in trying times, I was optimistic about the future, because I believe in the people of Newton.

I am still optimistic about the future. And three years as Mayor of this good City, working with so many residents, with so many dedicated, talented employees, seeing what we can do together, makes my belief in the people of Newton even greater.

But three years after saying those words, that we are living through trying times, I can truly say I had no idea, I don't think any of us did, how trying these times could become.

We have been through a world of hurt over this past year.

We are living through a pandemic. COVID-19 not only changed our vocabulary, it literally changed our way of life. As of last Friday, 154 Newtonians have died with COVID-19. This is not over.

The killing of George Floyd under the knee of a Minneapolis Police Officer, and the killing of too many other people of color has brought to the surface the pain of generations of people who have suffered because of racism and bias, because of unequal access to housing, jobs, education and healthcare.

The pandemic also brought a financial crisis that has certainly affected our City budget, but even more urgently, it has affected too many living right here in our Villages. People who have lost their jobs and their health insurance, people who are struggling to make their mortgage or rent payment, struggling to feed themselves or their family.

I felt the fear of a community in the grips of a pandemic. I heard the righteous anger of people demanding change. I saw the desperation in people who are hungry.

I carry that fear, that anger and that desperation with me every day as I lead this City.

Three years ago, I came into office with a set of 12 goals -

We are well on our way to achieving many of them.

I said we would work together to give our older residents a new facility. We have a site selected and are designing a new senior center to be built at the site of the current, inadequate building.

I said we would work together to make Newton a greener City. I said we would have a Climate Action Plan in place – and we do. I said we would save Webster Woods, and we did. We implemented Newton Power Choice, we moved forward with Solar Phase 3, we turned our City fleet over to be entirely electric and added charging stations. We will be hiring an Energy Coach in the new year.

I said I would address the crumbling condition of too many Newton streets. I put \$9 million toward repaving our roads and we fixed the worst of them.

I said we would make sure our students get the best education in the Commonwealth and I prioritized the school budget, provided funding for full-day kindergarten and settled the contract with the Newton Teachers

I said we would keep our City's finances on solid ground – and that sound management put the City of Newton in a position to make it through the toughest challenge we've faced in decades.

We completed vision plans for Needham Street, Washington Street and Riverside, created 113 units of affordable housing at the Golda Meir and Haywood House developments through CPA funding, are well on our way to acquiring the Armory to transition into affordable housing, and are moving forward with Zoning reform.

We started NewMo, an innovative ride share program for our older residents. We brought a bike share program to Newton. We planted more trees than we lost for the first time in XX years. We opened the new Cabot School, added classrooms to Oak Hill Middle School and are planning for a new NECC and new school at 150 Jackson Road.

Then, In the first week of March – everything changed.

COVID-19 hit hard. My focus became singular – keep people healthy and whole, keep them well informed, look to the experts, adapt and focus on the most vulnerable.

With incomplete and changing information I had to make quick decisions about people’s health and economic well-being.

Every decision I made, every day, rippled through the everyday lives of Newtonians.

I was lucky to be surrounded by a remarkable team at City Hall, and I called on the relationships I had with Gov. Baker and my fellow mayors across the state, our state legislators, the MMA and MAPC and the leaders of our neighboring towns.

I relied on the emergency planning that we had already done, and keeping Fire Chief Proia on in his role as Emergency Operations was incredibly helpful.

I worked with department heads to make sure that while City Hall was closed, the City was still open for business.

We made sure our first responders had the PPE they needed to stay protected.

Our Senior Center closed, but Zoom classes became a community lifeline for many. Our Senior Services Department staff and volunteers made more than 7,000 “check-in” calls to people 60 and older who live alone in Newton. They’ve delivered close to 7,000 weekly meals since March, and more than 200 older residents have received 600 deliveries of groceries and other essentials.

Our Parks, Recreation and Culture Department put many classes online and Mark Kelly quickly pivoted his Athletes Unlimited programs to Zoom. The Farmers' Market was able to run at a new location with physical distancing, mask and hand sanitizing protocols in place.

Schools -

Three years ago I asked the people of Newton to help me take charge of our City's future so that we could leave it greater, better and more beautiful.

Today, I am more certain than ever that working together, we will meet not only the challenge of COVID-19, but every challenge we face.