

## Mayor's Update



*Tonight I gave the State of the City Address. Here is what I said:*

Good evening.

Tonight we are reminded yet again of how much the pandemic has disrupted our lives.

Traditionally, we would have been together in the City Council chamber with Councilors and their President, Susan Albright, School Committee members, staff and residents for this State of the City address.

But not this year.

In addition to the rituals of civic life, we've been forced to reimagine how we celebrate the milestones of birthdays, weddings and graduations and have foregone the pleasures of July 4<sup>th</sup> at Albemarle or a simple Sunday dinner with extended family.

COVID-19 has stripped us of essentials. We can't comfort loved ones in the hospital or collectively mourn at a funeral. Our hearts break week after week for everyone who has lost a loved one – including the families and friends of 188 of our neighbors who have died with COVID.

The toll on us has taken many forms:

- Anxiety over how to keep safe and stay healthy.
- Frustration as we try to get a vaccine for ourselves or a family member.
- Loneliness as we physically distance from friends and colleagues.
- Distress as our children learn remotely.
- Worry as jobs disappear and unpaid bills mount.

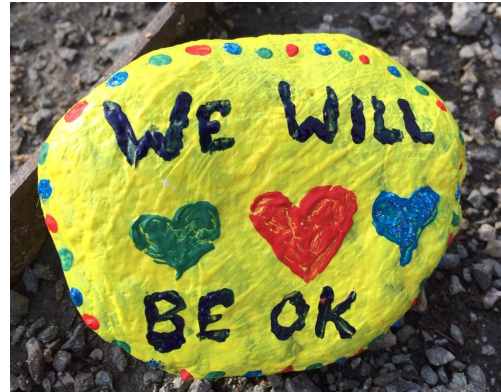
And, yet, in the face of such hurt, people across our good city have stepped forward to lend a hand. Newton is full of helpers.

I smile when I think of:

- The 150 plus members of our community who in the early days of the pandemic donated PPE, from National Lumber on Needham Street to our Newton Chinese associations. Mike Halle donated masks and Kevin Osborne with his 3D printer made countless face shields and ear-savers;
- Jerry Reilly, Reverend Devlin Scott, Newton Pride's Howie Sholkin and our Director of Cultural Development,, Paula Gannon, put together physically distanced community drive-ins to safely bring us together this past summer, and Peter Standish and Kent Gonzales offered staff, electricity, and space at

Northland to help make it possible;

- Rob Gifford, Claire Sokoloff and a fundraising team raised over \$750,000 dollars for the Newton COVID-19 Care Fund, Gail Sokoloff, Claire's sister, of the United Way set up a portal for the contributions, and Jon Firger and Karen Seniuk from Family Access distributed the funds quickly to those in need;
- Rochelle Walensky, Ashish Jha, Dan Barouch, Haya Mayman, Justin Holtzman, Jodi Larson and Ruth Hoshino are just a few of the legion of Newton's doctors, scientists, nurses and health care workers who treated patients, developed vaccines, set up testing and vaccination sites, took care of our students and kept us informed. I am reassured that Rochelle will be leading the CDC going forward and I'm grateful that she's been helping us out since early in the pandemic when she joined me at NewTV to answer so many of our questions.
- I also smile at the many anonymous small gestures and kind acts of caring - those who picked up extra groceries for their neighbor, who checked in on our older residents, who maybe even today helped shovel a sidewalk. I remember that small rock found along a trail at Dolan Pond back in April, left by a child whose name we'll likely never know - painted yellow with three small hearts, the words said, "We Will Be OK."



Here at City Hall we have focused on making sure we will be okay by helping those in need. I consciously tried to lead with a steady hand and a compassionate heart, making health decisions based on facts and science, communicating frequently, advocating for better state and federal support, and ensuring our decisions reflect our core values of respect, diversity and acceptance.

I'm doing this critical work with staff who are extraordinarily dedicated public servants.

- Amanda Berman, our Housing and Community Development Director, quickly mobilized our team to provide \$3.6 million dollars of emergency housing and small business assistance. One recipient, Kim, recently emailed, "This program was essential to our being able to continue to pay the rent .... I really, really appreciate the kindness and foresight that went into creating this program and made me feel that I a valued was resident of my community ... Thank you and blessings to everyone who was involved ..."
  - To put together and distribute 358,042 meals and counting to our neighbors in need through a Grab and Go program, we needed more than the proverbial 13 villages.
- Waneta Trabert, who serves as our Director of Sustainable Materials Management, jumped at the chance to lead the effort.
- The staff at Whitson's, our Newton Public Schools food service provider, were invaluable: flexible, positive, and ingenious.

- City Councilors acted quickly and decisively to approve our COVID requests.
- Amalia Timbers in our Mayor’s Office has been the rock at the Newton South site and Margaret Ford from the Library has stepped up at Newton North.
- Volunteers from the community joined with school nurses, and staff from Health and Human Services and the Schools to provide these meals. Kudos to Evgeny Ter-Ovanesyan, Annie Madden, Diane Bet, David Wenstrom, Mary Petry, Gayle Larson, Aimee Sullivan, Stephen Marshall and many, many more.
  - That’s not all. Senior Services Director Jayne Colino and the Senior Center team of staff and volunteers made more than 7,000 phone calls to every Newton resident 60 years and older living alone.
  - Director Jill Mercurio and the Newton Free Library staff have been hard at work. More than half a million items – 564,701 to be exact - have circulated since March.

For 2021 and beyond, I am all in on moving us forward and helping us recover, rebound and rebuild.

At City Hall, I am laser focused on getting our residents access to vaccines, whether we are 85, 65, or 25. I will continue to press the State to set up more sites, from doctors’ offices to pharmacies here in Newton and large sites nearby. For those who are homebound, without internet access or family to help make appointments, the City’s staff is here for you. Just call.

While we wait our turn for the vaccine, to quote Bill Belichick, let’s do our job. Wear face masks. Physically distance. Wash hands frequently. Stay home when not feeling well.

For me, reopening our schools full-time is an urgent priority. I will do everything I can from City Hall to not just open fully in September but also to help students this spring who want to be in person more. As weekly surveillance testing rolls out in a few weeks, our ventilation upgrades in school buildings finish up, and our educators and staff get vaccinated, we will have all the key ingredients in place for more in-person teaching and learning.

Small businesses are the lifeblood of our village centers. We have already provided \$300,000 in recovery grants to our brick and mortar businesses and soon will provide another \$300,000. Installing at no cost to our restaurants painted barriers on the street for safe outdoor dining, placing picnic tables in parking lots, expanding sidewalk seating, and expediting alcohol permits- we will build on these efforts and continue to partner with our restaurants, retailers and small businesses.

In our complex world, we in Newton City Hall have to do multiple things simultaneously, now more than ever.

We will support the City Council’s work on updating our zoning. Newton’s future depends on zoning that supports village centers full of life and variety- stores and offices, housing and restaurants, art and culture. Our city must have a mix of housing options so our next generation can live here, and our older residents have a place to downsize so they can stay. We are rightfully proud that 489 deed-restricted,

permanently affordable units have been permitted since my inauguration. We'll keep going.

We will drive forward our environmental efforts. Newton continues to be the leader in Massachusetts with our electricity aggregation program, Newton Power Choice. Right now, everyone in Newton has access to 80% green renewable energy and residents can easily opt up to 100%. We created a new position, an Energy Coach; join me in welcoming Liora Silkes who just started at City Hall to help our residents, builders and contractors think through choices on heating, air conditioning, energy sources and more as we implement Newton's first ever Climate Action Plan.

COVID-19 meant strict physical distancing for our older residents. We'll reconnect going forward by building on our transformative rideshare program, NewMo, and finishing the design for our new community center for seniors.

I will work with our Selection Committee to find our next Police Chief. This person will lead us in the next chapter of this strong Department's history to deliver fair, just, respectful, safe and effective community policing and to support our dedicated officers with training, facilities, technology and more.

I am looking forward to our important work on improving our streets and athletic fields, school buildings and recreation facilities. With \$11 million dollars invested and a little more work this spring, the village centers of West Newton Square and Newtonville will be much more attractive, useable and accessible. Across the city, we have paved 47 miles of roadway since I've been Mayor; more is needed and the work will continue.

We have an exemplary record of careful financial management with AAA bond ratings from Moody's. Our financial strength has allowed us to navigate these stormy economic waters. But, let me be straight. The budget will be tight this coming year. In order to sustain our work, we'll have to feather in some of our investments and initiatives over time.

We'll be better at this work in the years ahead because of what we've been through this past year. We were challenged by so many unknowns and faced with ever-changing information. As a result, we collaborated more than ever. We learned to run a City remotely and created new ways to deliver City services. In the process, we built new skills and I know this muscle memory will serve us well.

No surprise, Newtonians have stayed engaged. We might have been distancing physically and yet people spoke up. They Zoomed in. They pinged us back when we sent out an email update. At City Hall, our goal is to listen and we do. Regardless of where you live or who you are, your voice counts.

Yet, some of the public discourse this past year has grown hateful. For example, just this past month, banners trumpeting white supremacy and anti-Semitism were hung not once but twice on an overpass here in Newton. These banners appeared at such a difficult time – soon after the Capitol was overrun, and in the wake of a year in which severe racial disparities— whether economic, educational or health— have been laid bare. I am actively committed to combating racism and hate. I ask for your help as we strive for deeper, more systemic racial justice and equity.

Despite these monumental challenges, I am filled with a sense of hope for the year ahead.

I am hopeful because of the humanity I've seen from so many Newtonians, City workers and school teachers during this pandemic. Just this afternoon little Reid stopped by my office to drop off his hand made piggy bank which he filled up to help one of our food pantries.

*(Photo: Reid's bank)*

I am hopeful because in the face of multiple crises, the state of our City is strong, resilient, and good.

I am hopeful because I am confident that we will recover, rebound and rebuild. We will meet this moment together and be a better community as we emerge from the pandemic.

Good night from Newton City Hall.

Mayor Ruthanne Fuller

