

Mayor Ruthanne Fuller
State of the City
February 19, 2019

Tonight, I am pleased to report that the state of the city is strong.

That should not come as a surprise, but it is not something we should take for granted.

For it is our duty, those of us who have been honored by the voters of Newton with the responsibility to make decisions, it is our duty to ensure the state of our city is strong.

The state of our City is strong because we are caring for our children, our seniors and those who are vulnerable.

Thanks to our educators, our Superintendent and our School Committee, we are successfully providing academic excellence in an equitable manner while embracing the social and emotional needs of our 12,685 students. And, this fall, for the first time in the city's history, our youngest children will have full day kindergarten.

We are finding more ways to make Newton a place where our seniors can age in place and thrive.

- I worked with this honorable City Council so that more seniors on tight budgets can defer their property taxes, helping them to stay in their homes.
- We are also well on our way to designing and siting a new community center that will better serve our seniors and others, one of my key priorities.
- As Mayor, I am committed to helping our seniors who face mobility and driving challenges continue to be able to participate in all we have to offer. With help from our Director of Senior Services, Jayne Colino, and our Transportation Planner, Nicole Freedman, I am excited to announce that we are poised to launch a state-of-the art ride sharing service for our seniors. The service provides easily identifiable vehicles, vetted drivers who will walk their passenger to the door, reliable and affordable service, and not just advance reservations but real time ride hailing. This ground-breaking ride sharing service is what our seniors need and deserve.

Through the collaborative efforts of non-profits, volunteers and City staff, we are providing help to those facing challenges. Here are some great examples:

- Our veterans and their partners at the Greater Boston Food Bank assist hundreds of people who face food insecurity, providing fresh produce and staples the third Friday of

each month at the Post 440 while at City Hall and in Newton Centre three additional food pantries open their doors wide.

- Mark Kelley and so many others in our Parks and Rec Department, the volunteers at Athletes Unlimited, nonprofits led by people like Justin Salloway at the Price Center and by Brenda Noel of the Newton Wellesley Weston Committee for Community Living provide jobs, homes, community and joy to people with disabilities.
- Our Newton police officers and the NPD Jail Diversion Clinician Sarah Eknaian sensitively assist those coping with mental illness every day.
- Our social workers at City Hall and the Senior Center as well as our nurses, guidance counselors, teachers and Resource Officers in our schools support those who are experiencing stress, anxiety, depression, addiction or financial uncertainty.
- I continue to work assiduously with partners --including the CPC, the Newton Housing Authority, NCDF, 2LifeCommunities and MetroWest -- on the difficult and critical work of providing affordable and more diversified housing options so people of all means and all ages and all backgrounds can make Newton their home; only with this diversity will Newton remain strong, for diversity underpins our City's strength.

The City of Newton is strong because we are a safe community, in fact one of the safest in the United States, with well trained and well-equipped police officers and firefighters. As the sister of a former police officer and as a former City Councilor, I knew how important first responders were, but, as Mayor, I have come to appreciate so much more deeply how dedicated our first responders are to protecting us in jobs that are difficult and dangerous.

The City of Newton is strong because we are planning our future consciously and conscientiously.

- Our engineers and planners are working hard to design our streets to address congestion on the main roads, speeding on the side ones, and safety concerns of people walking and biking.
- This City Council is thoughtfully working with our city planners to make the draft of our new zoning ordinance better, so it can serve us well as we preserve what is best about Newton and take charge of our future.
- With public input, and, yes, public debate, we are deciding what we want in the decades ahead on Needham Street, Washington Street and at Riverside.
- Whether it is large scale development or small additions, retail marijuana establishments or new coffee shops like Central in Newton Centre, I know that I, as Mayor, and our strong administrative team will work closely with the City Council and our residents to chart the best course forward for our good city.

The City of Newton is strong because we are ensuring its financial sustainability for today and for tomorrow.

I am making sure we are financially healthy, so we can pay our employees a fair wage, provide excellent health insurance, and make sure the pensions and health care we promise are funded. I am focusing on our finances, so we can afford the things we need, like fixing our roads and repairing our school buildings. Two weeks ago, Moody's Investor Services affirmed our financial strength by again assigning us its highest rating, a Aaa, even while cautioning us to guard against operating deficits, greater reliance on free cash, material increases in debt, and failure to reduce our unfunded pension liability over the medium term. I will continue to be that guardian.

The City of Newton is strong because we are becoming more resilient, cleaning up our recycling, reducing energy consumption and greening our energy supply.

- Many of us took the time to learn what can and can't go in our green carts. Because of these efforts, our contamination rate dropped by half. Remember, no plastic bags!
- Additional solar panels will be installed in the coming months after this honorable City Council votes tonight, and I thank our Co-Director of Sustainability Bill Ferguson for his hard work.
- I am pleased to tell you we are ahead of schedule on my initiative to green our City fleet: With the approval of this City Council, in this coming fiscal year, approximately two-thirds of our City owned passenger fleet will be fueled by electricity, not gasoline.
- Let me tell you what environmental initiative of which I am most proud: Newton Power Choice. With the decision I made on November 23rd, the equivalent of 60%+ of the electricity our entire community uses will be purchased from renewable sources like solar and wind. With the help of Ann Berwick, our other Co-Director of Sustainability, Newton Power Choice is giving our City the highest threshold of green energy in the state, and please consider opting up to 100 percent.

The City of Newton is strong because we are resilient in another sense. We say a heartfelt thank you and a bittersweet good-bye to two amazing public servants who with deep experience and true humility have given us their talents for 39 and 33 years respectively, Fire Chief Bruce Proia and Director of Assessment Administration Elizabeth Dromey.

At the same time, we congratulate Jim Shaughnessy, our new Director of Assessment Administration, pending this City Council's approval; we welcome Michelle Pizzi O'Brien as our Human Resources Director; and we look forward to finding our next Fire Chief with an interview committee that includes City Councilor Lenny Gentile.

The City of Newton is strong because of the people who choose to work here, and who follow Bill Belichick's philosophy: they "do their jobs" and, might I add, do them well – this includes mechanics and street repair crews, city clerks and historians, assessors and tellers, custodians and crossing guards, and so many more. Their ranks include Lou Fernandes, a member of our Public Buildings Department, who responded valiantly last month to a man collapsed and bleeding in our City Hall

basement. Lou saved this man's life. It includes people like Rachel Nadkarni, who drafted an up-to-date zoning ordinance for the City Council's review and who, because of her work, is now listed as Innovator of The Year on a plaque in the City Hall Rotunda. To Newton's employees, please know you have my respect and my gratitude.

Our City's strength rests on the good work done by our residents and staff to make life in our community full and varied, warm and engaging, welcoming and inclusive. We enjoy music and performances at the Porchfest in Auburndale, swim at Crystal Lake and Gath Pool, ice skate at the Cove, paint windows on Halloween, play pickleball at Emerson and dance Zumba at the Senior Center. We enjoy lectures at the Newton Free Library, feast in Upper Falls, celebrate the Chinese New Year, run Paddy's Road Race in West Newton, and watch movies at the Hyde on Friday nights – thank you John Rice and all our so called "Village People." This is just a sampling of the strength of community in Newton, and I never take for granted how wonderful, how cool, this place is.

It also shows that we are much more than our bricks and mortar, or our tree-lined streets. Our most important source of strength is our people. The Newton we love is not just a city of 88,000 individuals; it's a community of neighbors. And our neighbors join together with helping hands to support each other. We have been there for each other in our darkest hours this past year, when our City lost bright lights, including Peg Hannigan, Tony Bibbo, Susan Kaplan, and John O'Hara.

I also need to add with a heavy heart that just a few hours ago, I learned that Darrell Azure, our Office Engineer, who served the City for more than 28 years, died today. An energetic, enthusiastic, dedicated person who knew all the answers when someone came to the desk, Darrell was only 51. Our thoughts and prayers are with his mother, Jan, and his twelve and fourteen-year-old children.

City Hall is also reeling from the loss of Linda Plaut on Sunday morning. We will be there tomorrow with Jonathan and Julie to say good-bye and to give thanks for the life of Linda Plaut. Linda engaged so many of us for so many years in dancing and singing, playing the piano and running foot races, serving this City together on a Sunday in the spring and celebrating July 4th at Albemarle.

We will be there too on Sunday to comfort Katy as we mourn the loss of a spiritual leader, an impatient advocate for affordable and fair housing, and an activist for racial equity and social justice, the Reverend Howard Haywood.

Linda Plaut and Howard Haywood loved this City. Both gave their all to this City. To paraphrase Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, both acted so that each tomorrow found us farther than today. Linda Plaut and Howard Haywood are shining examples of what makes Newton Newton. Fundamentally, it is our people who form the City of Newton's bedrock.

Let me close with a recent example of the living proof of our strength and caring spirit: On Friday night, I received an email from Gary McKendrick who lives in Saint John, New Brunswick, Canada. He wrote that he had just watched the CBS Evening News which closed with a story, I quote, "about a sweet little deaf girl that has won the hearts of the residents of Islington Road, I believe it was called. These wonderful people all learned American sign language, so they could communicate with the little girl and they could understand what she was saying. I have to give you and your city a very heartfelt "Well done" and "Thank you" for reminding us ... there are still GREAT people like the

residents of Islington Road in Newton, Mass and that goodness and love does exist. My wife and I would love to visit your beautiful city someday soon.”

I just learned how to say Thank You and Good Night in sign language. I will now ask Samantha's, Sam's, parents, Glenda and Rafi, and their Islington Peninsula neighbors to rise and show us all how to say, Thank You and Good Night. Then, I will ask all of us to rise and turn to Glenda and Rafi, and say to them thank you and good night.

To everyone who lives and works in Newton, thank you and good night.