

Tuesday, Feb. 2 2022

## Mayor's Update

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

Good Evening.

President Albright, Vice President Lipof, President Emeritus Baker, City Councilors, Chair Olszewski, Vice Chair Shields, members of the School Committee, State Representative Khan, and everyone watching on Zoom or on NewTV, including 3-year-old Henry, my grandson, good evening.

Tonight, I reaffirm my commitment to building a greater, better, more beautiful Newton. Core to that commitment is the spirit of working together with the elected officials assembled on this call as well as civic organizations and residents from all of our villages. By finding common cause, we will continue to move Newton forward.

Working together, we achieved so much in the last four years:

- Implementing full day Kindergarten
- Securing Webster Woods for future generations
- Inventing and then expanding our city-wide ride service, Newton in Motion, or NewMo
- Writing and implementing our first ever Climate Action Plan
- Drafting permits by Councilors with care and cooperation to transform massive parking lots at Northland and Riverside into places to live, work, and play
- Communicating frequently and substantively with the community through Mayoral emails
- Improving City services with everything from composting and textile pickups to translation services
- Helping our residents, students, businesses and non-profits as we shut down and reopened, physically distanced and masked up, implemented remote and hybrid learning, fast tracked \$5 million dollars in a monumental makeover of NPS ventilation systems so kids could be back in full classrooms full time, tested then vaccinated, boosted, and tested some more, isolated and grieved as together we helped each other through the COVID-19 pandemic

These accomplishments and collaborations prove how much we can do by working together.

I can confidently say that the state of our City is strong:

Excellent schools. Low crime rates. Outstanding services. A triple A bond rating. New school buildings. A compassionate and science driven response to the pandemic. A wonderful community of neighbors.

We feel a palpable sense of optimism in the air as the Omicron surge wanes and we can wear masks more selectively. We are confident that with the vaccines, boosters and testing we can pivot to living with this endemic.

With this optimism, it's time to turn our attention to matters at hand.

In the next few weeks, we will be putting our final touches on our Fiscal Year 2023 Budget. We are fortunate that while our revenues are still down, they are getting stronger. Thanks to our prudent financial planning, we will be proposing the largest operating budget in the City's history for both the Newton Public Schools and our City Departments.

*(Photo: With Safe Routes to School and biking advocate Jenn Martin.)*

In addition, we are fortunate to have access to our one-time American Rescue Plan Act, or ARPA, funds to help us recover and rebuild, to support those hurt by the pandemic and injustice, and to invest in our community. These investments will make Newton more resilient, livable, vibrant, inclusive and sustainable. Residents gathered last Wednesday night on Zoom to discuss how to invest our ARPA funds and the heart and soul of Newton was on full display at this community listening session:

- Two people who have committed hours and hours to make our roads and sidewalks safer, Jenn Martin and Jane Hanser, gave us ideas to make them even better for pedestrians of all ages, runners and bicyclists.
- Advocates for people of color and those with financial, housing, food or mental health challenges, Josephine McNeil and Angela Pitter Wright, challenged us to prioritize those who have been hurt most by the pandemic.
- Leaders in lifting our spirits, Gloria Gavis, Chris Pitts and Jerry Reilly, suggested ways to enliven our village centers with light and music.
- Environmentalists, including Marcia Cooper, Alan Noguee and Alan Gordon, focused on zero waste and ecological investments and resident David Roll reminded us to improve our pocket parks such as the River Street playground.

These voices – and many others from across our city – represent what is so great about living here: caring, committed, creative Newtonians.

And yet ...

Our lives are full of challenges. Our collective grief from losing 239 Newtonians with COVID weighs on our hearts. Supply chain disruptions, staffing shortages and inflation are hitting our wallets. Housing prices are through the roof. Inequities dominate the headlines and we're experiencing far too many incidents of hate and bias. Our mental health has suffered as the stresses of the last few years continue. Even international news about Russia and Ukraine demands our attention. All of this is discomfiting.

Even with our financial strength, preparing next year's budgets will be a challenge. Costs are up and needs have increased. Despite a 3.5% increase for the Newton Public Schools budget and a 3.0% increase for the municipal departments, we will still have to make difficult choices.

Let me talk more about our Newton Public Schools. This year 11,700 students will receive a wonderful education, a 1,000 or 8% decrease in enrollment from five years ago. Notwithstanding this fact, our school system is poised to receive one of the single largest annual dollar increases in Newton's history. The NPS FY2023 budget of \$262 million, an \$8.9 million dollar increase over last year's spending, demonstrates our deep commitment to learning that defines our community. Additionally, in the last few weeks, I have committed an additional \$2 million dollars to NPS for social and emotional support for our students and technology upgrades, among other things. Even with this record investment combined with decreased enrollment, our Superintendent, School Committee, and staff will need to work diligently to deploy this funding judiciously. This record-breaking funding eases difficult decisions but does not eliminate them.

Similarly, we have difficult decisions to make on the municipal side. Each of us will want to appropriate more funding to our parks and playgrounds, our trees and green spaces, our traffic calming, pedestrian and bicyclist safety, and roads program, our municipal and school buildings, and our public safety and health and human services departments.

However, while our finances are arguably stronger and certainly stable, we must match our ambitions to what we can afford, just as every household in Newton does. We must prioritize. We must balance our budget.

As we work through these funding decisions, I can say confidently that the year ahead will be a banner one in so many ways and we have much about which to be excited.

We will invest in our people, our places and our community.

We are focused on a future where we support our people even more:

- Where we build the schools our children need. We will be cutting the ribbon at our new pre-school in 2022, followed by Lincoln-Eliot, and with Horace Mann, Countryside and Franklin queued up.
- Where our youngsters enjoy a new, expanded Children's Room at the Newton Free Library opening this summer.

*(Photo: With the amazing Audrey Cooper)*

- Where our older residents benefit from a new, accessible, state-of-the-art Senior Center. We'll honor the memory of Newtonians such as Audrey Cooper, who we lost last year. Audrey spent decades advocating for our older residents and helped found our first Senior Center at the former library in Newtonville which was never designed for the needs of older people. She understood that Newton needs a new Senior Center and knew we would honor the design elements of our current one. We've promised our older residents a new Senior Center for too long; now is the time to keep our promises and give back to the people who have given us so much.
- Where we weave music and theatre more into the everyday fabric of our lives with a performance pavilion at the Newton Centre Bowl and a renovated indoor auditorium at the new home of Lincoln-Eliot.
- Where those who are struggling with limited incomes and from mental health challenges, addiction, housing instability, food insecurity or domestic violence –all exacerbated by COVID—are better connected to care and support guided, in part, by our recently completed needs assessment, and
- Where we institutionalize equity and social justice, reinforce inclusion, affirm diverse identities, support victims of hate and bias, foster respect among all of us, and celebrate difference.

We will invest in our public spaces and places as we move toward a future:

- Where our village centers are more vibrant – with tree-lined wide sidewalks, outdoor dining, a thriving arts scene, diverse and affordable housing options, improved streets and lighting, safer infrastructure for walking and biking, and a healthy local business scene. We've completed Newtonville and West Newton Square; next up is Newton Highlands. The City Council meanwhile is hard at work on zoning for village centers which will allow for housing for working people, for young families just starting out, for our older residents when they want to downsize, and for people with limited incomes. We will zone for the future we want and need.
- Where our doors are opened wider to people on tighter budgets, with the transformation of the West Newton Armory into 43 green apartments that will be 100 percent affordable and the opening of Haywood House, additional apartments at Golda, and new middle-income senior housing at Opus on the 2 Life/JCC campus and we welcome others to Newton through a very effective inclusionary zoning process that creates affordable units alongside the market rate ones at places like Northland and Riverside.

*(Photo: With Katy Haywood at the groundbreaking for Haywood House named after her late husband, Rev. Howard Haywood.)*

- Where our first ever Affordable Housing Trust results in affordable housing coming online faster and more easily – a testament to the tremendous power of working together: the Mayor, City Councilors, members of the Community Preservation Committee and the Newton Housing Partnership, and the Planning and Development Department staff.
- Where Newton lives up to our moniker the “Garden City,” with improved playing fields starting with Albemarle and followed by Brown/Oak Hill, McGrath and Burr, refurbished playgrounds, improved greenways and accessible trails, more trees, well-maintained parks along with newly secured open spaces like the one we all fought for, our own Webster Woods, and a new, improved Gath Pool.
- Where we have roads and sidewalks in better condition for pedestrians, bicyclists and drivers and more transportation choices:
  - This past year, I, along with our state delegation led by Representative Khan and with Congressman Auchincloss, secured design funds from the MBTA for new commuter rail stations in Auburndale, West Newton and Newtonville to allow frequent and accessible service and we see a path forward to securing the construction funding.
  - We are working with the State to improve Hammond Pond Parkway, transforming it from car-centric to people-centric, and
  - Across the City, we are deploying Rectangular Rapid Flashing Beacons, piloting temporary speed bumps, refashioning intersections, and installing bike lanes to calm traffic and make it safer and more enjoyable for all of us to get around.

Our community must continue to evolve as we move toward a future:

- Where Newton continues to lead on green initiatives so we use less, green the rest, compost more, and recycle right. We’re setting the example here, with our Early Childhood Center being renovated to be heated with heat pumps rather than natural gas, and at Lincoln-Eliot as well.
- Where City services are easier to use and more responsive to our needs with our recently launched NewGov state-of-the-art online information system for permitting and more as a model.
- Where everyone who works for our City knows they will have excellent health insurance and a funded pension plan.

*(Photo: With Newton Police Service Dog Leo)*

One reason I am so confident in our shared future is that we have such a wonderful team here in the City helping us to get there. Our employees did the almost impossible over the last few years. They have never worked harder or under more strenuous conditions.

Our teachers, police officers, firefighters, nurses, inspectors, assessors, clerks, DPW and Parks, Rec and Culture employees, social workers, planners, lawyers, librarians and health and human services staff –along with so many others–pulled us through the pandemic. And they have gotten vaccinated. They are ready and so able to help us turn our ideas for a better future into concrete actions.

We also have a great team of leaders at City Hall.

In the last four years, we have gone from strength to strength with terrific new Department heads. John Carmichael, our new Chief of Police, is working on all fronts: improving and increasing training, updating policies and procedures, writing positive tickets to kids doing good deeds, and having Leo, our new community service dog, along with his human partner, Officer Justin Lau, all over the City. Michelle Pizzi O'Brien in Human Resources created and recreated COVID protocols for our employees and expanded our hiring network. John Lojek is heading up our NewGov team. Josh Morse in Public Buildings seems to have given his cell phone number to every resident and talks to each and every one of them whenever they call.

*(Photo: At Chief Lucchetti's swearing in ceremony, from left, Glenda Lucchetti and Michael Lucchetti, Firefighter Louis Lucchetti, Louise Lucchetti pinning his chief's badge on her husband, and grandchildren Dante and Isabella Lucchetti in the front row.)*

Tonight, I share that Chief Gino Lucchetti, our Fire Chief, will be celebrating his 65<sup>th</sup> birthday this summer which in Massachusetts means mandatory retirement. He has decided to step away in mid-May after forty-four and a half years serving this City. This son of the Lake, this good human being, and this extraordinary leader –especially during the pandemic – will always be a part of Newton and have a special place in my heart. My thanks include his wife Louise for she has made his service possible. We'll find a way, I hope, for an in-person celebration soon and, in the meantime, we'll move forward immediately with the process of selecting his successor.

In closing, we live arguably in one of the safest places on the planet according to resident Dr. Ashish Jha. We have financial strength and committed, engaged City Councilors, School Committee members and residents.

I know we can listen attentively to hear each other's views, forge compromises, make decisions, take action and move Newton forward. We have accomplished so much together and we will accomplish much more.

I look forward to all that is to come with hope and confidence:

- To facing the challenges that will arise with compassion, clarity and purpose
- To breaking down barriers that still persist in our community, and
- To seizing the opportunities that we have to build a greater, better and more beautiful Newton

I didn't consciously plan to give this State of the City on 2/22/22 but, bingo, it's auspicious that Twosday symbolizes cooperation and harmony. Our City Clerk, Carol Moore, reports 8 weddings at City Hall today!

Working together, we will ensure a positive today and a bright tomorrow for this city we love.

Thank you and good night.

Mayor Ruthanne Fuller

P.S. Grandson Henry managed to stay awake in his Mom's lap for the beginning of the speech. I'm guessing this was a perfect story time and he was fast asleep just a few minutes later.



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Mayor Ruthanne Fuller | 1000 Commonwealth Avenue, Newton, MA 02459

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