

## **Newton's State of the City Address**

**Delivered on February 21, 2023**

To President Albright, Vice President Lipof, President Emeritus Baker, Chair Olszewski, members of the City Council and School Committee, everyone here at City Hall or watching at home, good evening.

What a joy – and what a privilege – it is to live here in Newton, Massachusetts.

- We have great neighbors and neighborhoods.
- Newton is safe and if we have to dial 911, well trained police officers, firefighters and emergency medical technicians are there to help us.
- Our Schools are powered by teachers who are skilled and nurturing.
- People out for a walk in our green spaces are finding peace and quiet, *and* spotted salamanders in Webster Woods.
- We know our trash and recycling will be picked up and, when it snows, the roads will be plowed.
- The City is rock solid financially, earning the highest bond rating, a Aaa, yet again a few weeks ago – thank you Finance Committee Chair Councilor Grossman and CFO Maureen Lemieux.

I'm privileged and honored to be Mayor and to work together with all of you – our residents, business and non-profit community members, volunteers on so many Boards, Councils and Commissions, our dedicated City and School employees, and our committed elected office holders.

As wonderful as Newton is, we are not an island. The complex challenges cities and towns across the country are facing can be seen and felt right here.

I am reassured, though, as our resilient community rises to meet these challenges.

- The Newton Police Department, led by Chief John Carmichael, is modelling community policing. Our Police partner with our Social Workers at City Hall to address the underlying causes of public safety issues. Together, they are leading such programs as our Community Crisis Intervention Team and our newly formed Alcohol & Drug Coalition. NPD has also enhanced our co-response program for people experiencing mental health and substance use crises. Our

officers are actively engaging with residents in positive ways. You may have met Officer Lao with our community resource dog, Leo, who greets everyone with a wagging tail, seen a youngster receive a “positive” ticket, or taken part in last week’s Making a Senior your Sweetheart on Valentine’s Day. All of this stands in sharp contrast to what we see on the national news that too often features incidents of hate, sometimes at the hands of officers.

- Newton is standing up an economic mobility and stability program to support vulnerable residents during this time of economic uncertainty, supporting families as they continue their journey to permanent economic security.
- We are supporting Newton’s business community who have been through so much since March 2020 by doing more of what works and investing in our village centers. For restaurants, we have created permanent opportunities for outdoor dining to encourage folks to eat locally, which has the added benefit of driving foot traffic to our shops. Our direct investments in our village centers are a huge plus. In our renovated Newtonville village center, for example, shops are thriving; restaurants are opening; Bram Way is humming. We’re bidding out the streetscape improvements in Upper Falls soon and we’re on our way with designs for Newton Highlands. Proactively working with our businesses has helped blunt the impact of the pandemic and inflation.
- We have rolled up our sleeves to find ways to provide housing opportunities in our City for older residents who want to downsize, for our children who want to move back home, and for people of all incomes who are attracted to our safe neighborhoods and great schools. The West Newton Armory is being converted into homes for people with limited incomes and seniors in Haywood House – named after our beloved Rev. Howard Haywood. 2LifeCommunities is breaking ground the week after next on Opus on the JCC campus, a first in the nation apartment building for middle income seniors. Northland, following approvals from both our City Councilors and voters, is digging the foundations for its first market rate and affordable green apartment buildings. Not just Massachusetts but Newton is in the throes of a housing crisis with crazy high prices and I’m glad that we are finding ways to help people find a place to live. The Councilors on the Zoning and Planning Committee with a particular thank you to the Chair, Councilor Crossley, and the thoughtfulness of our planners at City Hall means we’ll have updated zoning for our village centers – zoning that works here in Newton and helps people and small businesses.

- We are consciously working to build a more inclusive, equitable and welcoming community. Whether celebrating holidays such as the Lunar New Year and Diwali, convening on Juneteenth, or addressing hate incidents/crimes, we are working to recognize, accept and celebrate our differences. Building an inclusive City takes work and we can't manage what we don't measure. At City Hall, we're undertaking an audit of how we recruit, hire and retain employees, provide services, listen to voices of disparate community members, and collaborate to better understand how to improve.
- We are reinvigorating our community treasures that bring us together and make us smile. The new Gath Pool and the updated Levingston Cove at Crystal Lake will be terrific for summer fun. The renovated tennis courts at Newton North are fabulous, the new lights at the Newton South athletic fields are allowing more athletes to play, and the fields at Weeks are in great shape. Director of Cultural Development Paula Gannon and the team as well as volunteers from Newton Community Pride, the Newton Cultural Alliance, the Hyde and Coletti-Magni Park – to name just a few – are filling halls and parks with music and dance, movies and festivals, soup socials and pumpkin painting. We're building bonds between neighbors and counteracting the divisiveness that too often defines discourse.
- We are actively working to improve our streets and transportation options. Our Public Works team, with an assist from Police and Planning, are working to calm traffic and improve the condition of roads and sidewalks. With Congressman Auchincloss and our partners at the State, including Representative Khan and Senator Creem, we're pushing for better commuter rail and bus service from the MBTA. We will continue to advocate for and invest in transportation that helps us get around and makes us safer and greener.
- Our children are the heart of our community. Little ones, their families and caregivers are really enjoying the story times, robot romps, and singalongs in the renovated and enlarged Children's Room at the Newton Free Library. Youngsters at the Horace Mann Elementary School are having a ball on the new playground equipment. For those experiencing anxiety and depression, we are there to help. Social workers, counselors, psychologists, and a crisis responder are available in the Newton Public Schools. We just opened Newton's first centralized home for the Newton Early Childhood Program (NECP), another building project completed on time and on budget. Thank

you, Public Buildings Commissioner Josh Morse and his team. Our youngest learners and their teachers now have an accessible facility designed specifically for toddlers. Plus, the renovated NECP is our first net-zero energy school building.

- Having our first net-zero school is just one tool in our growing toolkit for addressing climate change. Our electricity aggregation program, Newton Power Choice, now delivers 80% renewable energy as our default electricity supply, the highest level in the Commonwealth. We deliver this green power while this winter saving people hundreds of dollars on their electricity bills. The team here at City Hall, led by Energy Coach Liora Silkes, is helping homeowners make sustainable choices and save money as we add insulation, heat pumps or solar or switch to electric vehicles. With the help of our co-Directors of Sustainability, Ann Berwick and Bill Ferguson, City Councilors, and knowledgeable residents, we're figuring out how to make sure new buildings and those that are heavily renovated are electric.
- Unprecedented federal funds helped us through the pandemic. With a lot of input, these one-time funds have been invested in testing and vaccinating school and students, housing and economic needs, and permanent infrastructure. Thank goodness we were careful about limiting the use of these one-time funds for ongoing operating expenses, thus avoiding a fiscal cliff. While the City's revenue losses are more than what we received from the federal American Rescue Plan Act, these dollars contributed mightily to Newton's recovery. The ARPA funds are now almost fully allocated and thus not part of our budget calculations going forward.

In so many respects we are a City on the move, and we are constantly moving forward in ways that make Newton a better place for our residents. So, I am hopeful. I am bullish on Newton's future. Why?

- Because Newtonians are caring, involved and helping us forge thoughtful, sustainable solutions, and
- Because our team – the educators in our Schools and employees in our City departments – are as committed as ever to working to ensure Newton is a great place to live, raise a family, go to school, and do business.

Thanks to all our efforts, the state of the City of Newton is strong and together we will make it even stronger.

We will be even stronger by maintaining what is working, replacing what is worn out, balancing our budget, making new investments in line with our financial capacity, and, above all, using your tax dollars in the most efficient manner possible.

We have done a frank assessment of our finances and our capacity to cover rising costs and mounting needs.

Newton's revenues have always been quite predictable. Projections show an average annual revenue increase of 3.5% over the next 5 years. With that predictability comes the reality that we will not see any rapid increases, and the one-time pandemic era funding is at an end.

While our annual revenue is predictable, some of our expenses are anything but. The cost of student busing is escalating at 9% annually, trash and recycling at 7%, natural gas and other utilities at 22%, and building and road construction up an unprecedented 30%.

So too have we seen needs grow – computer devices for students in all grades, a paradigm shift in education to personalized learning, public and mental health needs, transportation services for older residents and more.

Every year, we build our budget from the bottom-up by re-examining every program, every activity and every dollar invested, matching what we do with the needs of our residents and businesses.

We're always seeking efficiencies to squeeze and stretch our tax dollars further.

When squeezing and stretching teeters on the edge of compromising and cutting critical programs and services, we turn to you, our residents, to make the decision.

I am asking for additional financial support from you, our taxpayers, with an override to meet growing needs and higher costs and to provide a reliable source of annual funding to invest in Newton's future.

I am asking for all of us to prioritize our children, their education, and a greener, safer, better future for our community.

While this override proposal comes at an inopportune time, it is incumbent upon us to act responsibly now or force serious budget cuts, especially in the Newton Public Schools, that will have a real impact in the short and long-term.

Newtonians have a tradition of approving an override once every ten years or so to reset our base budget. We've voted yes twice, in 2002 and again in 2013. This "once a decade" approach sets us apart from neighboring communities like

Needham and Wellesley that have passed 11 and 14 overrides respectively in this same period. Brookline, which in the past eight years has passed two operating and four debt exclusion overrides, is also asking for another operating override in May to address rising costs and school and municipal needs.

The investments in our override are critical; I would not seek them for our community if I did not think so. When Proposition 2 ½ was enacted in 1980, voters in cities and towns were given the authority to approve increases greater than the limit of 2 ½ percent. Our state leaders back then fully understood that there would be times where the limits of Proposition 2 ½ would not be enough to support the ongoing needs of cities and towns.

Seventy-five percent of the dollars in the override proposal are for our Schools, our school buildings, and our 11,700 students. This is fitting and proper, aligning our budget with our collective priority of top-notch schools.

During budget deliberations last spring, the Newton City Council voted unanimously to support providing additional funds for the Newton Public Schools operating budget. I heard them loud and clear. I worked with the School Committee and the NPS Administration to determine a sustainable School budget for FY2024 and beyond. That funding is included in the proposed operating override.

With support at the ballot box, we will keep in place the staff that allows students to have access to music and the arts, to debate and mock trial, to sports, and to educators continuously striving for excellence and for personalized learning to meet the unique needs and interests of every student. These educators, interventionists, counselors, and more are supporting our children as they stretch, grow and excel. Selected unanimously on Friday, our new Superintendent Dr. Anna Nolin will have the wind at her back as she leads NPS forward. We have much to do as we pursue academic excellence. So too, much work lies ahead to achieve educational equity, to narrow the achievement gap, and to support the social and emotional needs of our students. All our efforts are focused on the goal of helping every student reach their full potential.

Parents at the Countryside, Franklin and Horace Mann Elementary Schools know firsthand that these school buildings need significant work. Rebuilding must move forward as soon as possible to address flooding, failing so-called “temporary” modulars, undersized classrooms, insufficient special education and support space and inaccessibility. We secured roughly \$20 million dollars from the Massachusetts School Building Authority for Countryside; without the support of our voters on March 14 we risk losing these funds as early as this summer. Moving forward with these three buildings keeps us on track with the rest of the queue, including Ward, Underwood, Pierce, and Mason Rice, and more. Let us

move forward with up to date 21<sup>st</sup> century facilities that foster learning and nurture our children's growth.

All of us can literally feel that Newton is playing catch-up on our roads and sidewalks. We've made progress. Check out most of Washington, Watertown, Walnut, Dedham and Chestnut Streets. But way too many are still too bumpy and need a lot more work.

That's why in the fall, I announced that we would use \$4 million dollars in additional one-time ARPA funds to pave our worst neighborhood roads over the next two construction seasons. I'm so glad tonight to release the list of the 51 we'll be paving this year as part of this initiative – check the City Website or my Mayor's Update that goes out after this speech for the [link](#).

A yes vote on the override will secure annual funding to allow us to shift from reactive repairs to preventative maintenance on our roads and sidewalks. Guaranteed funds will allow us to improve our pavement condition index by at least another 10 points. Whether we're walking, biking or driving, we'll have the monies built into the operating budget for paving and safety improvements.

All of us can see that we need to invest more in Newton's tree canopy. In our Garden City, we have half the number of street trees today than we did in 1983. In the last 5 years, we've turned the tide, planting more trees than we are losing. A yes vote will allow us to plant 1,000 street trees each year, take better care of the saplings, and prune the older ones. This will green our community, keep temperatures down, and help us live up to our moniker.

The pandemic made clear to all of us of that our parks, open spaces, athletic fields, playgrounds, and courts are essential. We are making progress by providing our Parks and Recreation maintenance teams with additional resources. But our dollars are not going far enough. We have the choice now to invest more to better maintain these wonderful community assets. For example, the override will provide dedicated funds to protect our upcoming investments in the Albemarle, Burr School, and McGrath Fields.

Many of us know that we have underinvested in programs and services for our largest and fastest growing group, our older residents. They need and deserve more critical services and high-demand programs. After more than 1,000 older adults worked together for years, we are on the cusp of breaking ground on a new senior center for active living. Open seven days a week, our older residents and others will gather to play pickleball or basketball in the gym, learn in the classrooms, get fit with Zumba, or shoot a game of pool. The one-two impact of a new facility and expanded programs and

services will help combat isolation and give back to those who have given so much to us.

The override will allow us to make much needed capital investments to green our buildings. We need to swap heating and air conditioning systems that are using fossil fuels over to electric replacements. A permanent source of funds keeps us on our path towards carbon neutrality in 2050, cementing Newton as a leader in tackling climate change. Simultaneously, the new heating, cooling, ventilation, and temperature controls will operate better, keep us more comfortable and lower operating costs.

With eggs at Star Market \$4.99 a carton and gas at Regan's \$3.59 a gallon, I know that the financial impact of the override may be difficult for some. When making the proposal, I worked with our City Councilors to double seven tax assistance programs and expand another two. In many cases, the financial assistance for those eligible will completely offset the increase from the override. Independent of what happens on March 14, please call us at City Hall and we'll help you figure out if you can take advantage of these programs.

By the way, many of you can see the impact of the override on you personally. Plug in your address in the override calculator at [newtonma.gov/override](http://newtonma.gov/override).

For those with a property valued at the median of \$1.2 million, the cost from three yes votes is \$290 dollars next year, rising seven years out by an additional \$183 dollars when the construction at Countryside and Franklin is completed.

I know this override request comes during a time of uncertainty. We are asking you to dig deeper into your wallets. We do not do so lightly.

Beyond dollars and cents, we are also asking for your trust:

- Trust that the funding in the override will indeed be the bridge from what our current resources allow to what all of us in Newton need
- Trust that we at City Hall and NPS will use those funds well to build a strong, sustainable bridge.

I will remain steadfast in my commitment to deliver high quality public services and programs to you, our residents and businesses. We will continuously push to improve how we deliver our work. We will invest each



taxpayer dollar carefully and transparently. We will always listen to your feedback. We will make sound financial decisions for both our current residents and for future generations. We will remain committed to the health, well-being, and safety of our 3,000+ valued employees. Simultaneously, we will be disciplined in settling union contracts that are fair, fiscally responsible, and financially sustainable.

When Newtonians gave permission to increase the tax base in 2002 and 2013, City Councilors, School Committee members and Mayors used that funding judiciously, effectively, and as intended. As Mayor, I am committed to doing the same.

With our collective will, Newtonians will again recommit to our children and their education, our elders, and our future.

Prior generations of Newtonians - parents, grandparents, and great grandparents - made significant investments in this great City. They answered the call and built the wonderful community we call home today.

Let future generations look back at this moment in Newton's history with pride. Let them see this generation as one that invested to make our community even stronger.

Let me close where I started.

What a joy – and what a privilege – it is for us to live here in Newton, Massachusetts.

Thank you and good night.

Mayor Ruthanne Fuller