

Monday, Feb. 3, 2025

Mayor's Newton Update

This evening I delivered the State of the City Address. These are my remarks:

Lieutenant Governor Driscoll, State Representatives Sangiolo and Schwartz and from next door in Brookline State Representative Vitolo, President Laredo, Vice President Kalis, President Emeritus Baker, City Councilors, School Committee Members, City Staff and Superintendent of the Newton Public Schools Dr. Anna Nolin, and Newtonians, good evening.

2,590. That's the number of days since I first took the oath of office as Mayor of the City of Newton.

As I stand before you tonight on the occasion of my eighth and final State of the City Address, I can say confidently that **the state of our city remains strong**. I am filled with that same sense of gratitude, responsibility, and motivation that I had on Day One.

We are strong financially. Moody's just a few weeks ago again gave us their highest credit rating, a triple Aaa.

We have attracted, retained and nurtured strong and talented teams beginning with the capable and caring Amalia Timbers, Hattie Kerwin Derrick, and Sam Nighman and emanating throughout City Hall, Police Headquarters, Fire Stations, our DPW yards and Parks, Recreation and Culture outposts, the Newton Free Library, the Ed Center, and our 22 schools which are powered by staff dedicated to serving our residents and students. Our teams work hard to deliver exceptional City services and provide a high-quality education to all our students.

We have strong and vigorous democratic institutions in our City Council and School Committee. Both are venues where the myriad views of our residents get aired, debated, and resolved. **We have a strong and large corps of volunteers** who step forward to serve on our boards, commissions, and PTOs. We have strong, robust engagement in our neighborhoods and villages, our business and non-profit communities, and from our many groups focusing on the issues of our times – whether education civil and human rights, climate, energy, arts/culture/community, housing, transportation, interfaith dialogue, justice, civility, and more.

We are making strong, durable investments across the city. We have obligated all our American Rescue Plan Act or ARPA funding by the 2024 deadline so each dollar is being put to work. We expanded the Children's Room

at the Newton Free Library, improved ventilation, technology, curriculum and athletic fields in the Newton Public Schools, paved neighborhood roads, updated outdoor recreation infrastructure, and assisted our small businesses, non-profits, and residents disproportionately hurt by COVID-19. Jonathan Yeo, our COO, has been our ARPA leader; well done Jonathan.

We act on our strong, deep commitment to people who are disabled, are LGBTQ+, and those who are marginalized, stigmatized or financially insecure in need of a roof over their head and food on their table. I want to give a shout out to the meaningful efforts of the Centre Street, Newton and Arabic Baptist Church food pantries.

And, **together, we have accomplished so many of the aspirational goals I set out for us in my Inaugural Speech** on January 1, 2018:

- **Rebuilding schools** with new additions complete at Oak Hill and ready to go at Horace Mann, the construction of three new elementary schools unfolding as I speak - Lincoln-Eliot, Countryside and Franklin, and the creation of our first dedicated facility for our preschoolers with our littlest ones already in the building. I want to shine a light on the great work over so many years on school buildings by Josh Morse, our Public Buildings Commissioner, and his team as well as Emily Prenner, School Committee and School Building Member Extraordinaire.
- **Opening the Cooper Center for Active Living** this fall, Newton's first ever building designed specifically to be all age friendly with a focus on older adults, our fastest growing demographic group.
- **Reinvesting in our streets and sidewalks** with 125 roads repaved in the last two years alone.
- **Updating our zoning for housing** near public transit. By allowing for more and varied housing, Newton will welcome young adults who want to move home (but not into their parent's basements), older residents who want to downsize, and people with modest incomes who are priced out of Newton, all this while simultaneously strengthening the vitality of our villages. Thank you City Councilors.
- **Building an ecosystem that supports affordable housing.** These efforts include creating our first ever Affordable Housing Trust which paid dividends just a few weeks ago with the approval of funding for 112 units of affordable housing on North Street. Reconstruction of the West Newton Armory for affordable family housing begins this spring. We are also joining with the State and an amazing non-profit, FamilyAid, to open a family shelter with excellent wrap around services for mothers and children. We are working with trusted partners including the Newton Housing Authority and 2Life Communities to expand affordable senior housing. We are adding affordable and more attainable housing with our updated inclusionary and accessory dwelling ordinances; thank you again City Councilors and thank you to Barney Heath, our Director and Newton's Planning staff for your enormous help.

- **Getting the commitment to rebuilding the Newtonville Commuter Rail Station** by engaging with state leaders and the MBTA. Kudos go to the Governor, Lieutenant Governor and MBTA General Manager Eng for their leadership, and to former State Representative Kay Khan and Congressman Jake Auchincloss for their persistence.
- **Making sustainability our touchstone and renewable energy the order of the day.** Newton is leading on sustainability thanks to great leadership from Ann Berwick and Bill Ferguson and a bevy of knowledgeable residents. With their leadership, we have led Massachusetts with Newton Power Choice, solar panels, electric vehicles, an energy coach, electrification, BERDO (and more), all guided not just by our first ever Climate Action Plan but with Version 2.0 underway.
- **Preserving Webster Woods** for future generations. Bravo Councilor Baker, Chief Environmental Planner Jennifer Steel, Beth Wilkinson and Ouida Yong and so many others.
- **Keeping the community prepared for fires, floods, extreme heat, snow and ice** with not hats off but rather a helmet off to Greg Gentile who is double helmeted as our Fire Chief and Emergency Operations Director.
- **Supporting our Police** and Chief McMains so they continue to have the resources and training to keep our community safe.
- **Providing quality City services** in part by overhauling our 311 system and enabling online permitting for the first time in city history.
- **Helping our community members be as healthy as possible** – even during a worldwide pandemic – by providing up to date, scientifically based information, and compassionate access to human and mental health resources.
- **Investing in our future** with \$630 million of capital projects completed or underway during my time as Mayor while staying fiscally responsible and balancing the immediate needs of our residents with our significant long-term unfunded responsibilities to our retirees. We are doing so despite being buffeted by the financial fallout of the pandemic and inflation. Great work CFO Maureen Lemieux.
- **Providing a Mayor's Update filled with nerdy, comprehensive and fun information** to 38,000 plus unique contacts and making it useful so that we average a 70% open rate. I tip my proverbial hat to Ellen Ishkanian, our Director of Community Communications.

(Photo: With Lt. Gov. Kim Driscoll)

- **Asking for ideas, holding frequent office hours, listening intently, resisting divisiveness, and acting respectfully**, all while trying my best to model the golden rule. I would like to thank Kim Driscoll for serving as a role

model in this regard, both as Mayor of Salem and now Lieutenant Governor. She leads, gets stuff done, and tackles thorny issues with wisdom and grace. Thank you LG.

I am proud to lead a city where **we live our strong values of respect and inclusion, diversity and acceptance, compassion and equity**. All year long we come together to celebrate, to support, and to learn from each other . . . at Lunar New Year and Diwali, with a Rabbi lighting a menorah on the Newton Centre Green and Santa ushering in Christmas at Coletti-Magni Park, on Veterans Day and the Fourth of July, on Juneteenth and Indigenous Peoples Day, at Ramadan Iftar and the St. Mary of Carmen Festa in the Lake ... and that's just a sampling.

Yes, the state of our city remains strong.

We will need this strength in the days ahead.

We have much work to do.

Some of this work is clear and straightforward: Support our youngsters in our public schools. Pave more roads while making Newton safer for walking and biking. Encourage more diversity in our housing. Refresh more playgrounds and open another splash pad. Plant more trees. Increase and improve athletic fields. Expand community policing. Raise the curtain on more performing arts at our first community auditorium at the new Lincoln-Eliot. Invest more in flood mitigation. Provide more access to social services.

Some of the work ahead is more challenging. This work involves trying to build consensus, moving forward by embracing change, and prioritizing between competing goals.

Here are just a few of the challenges that we have to work through:

- At the former Walker Center next to the Williams Elementary School in Auburndale, we have competing goals for the site: affordable housing, historic preservation, recreation, and school needs.
- To improve the village center in Newton Highlands, we need to balance the needs of businesses and neighbors, parking and driver/pedestrian/bicyclist safety. In addition, we simply do not have enough dollars for the infrastructure investments while also doing something I know the neighborhood would love – undergrounding the overhead wires.
- In the heart of Newton Centre where we have a large parking lot, we want to support our businesses and have the right mix of convenient parking and great gathering space.
- Our two largest development projects perhaps ever, Northland and Riverside, both may be coming back again for approvals. Northland is this coming week. Understandably we want it all for these projects, and yet the sum total of our asks may end up not being fully feasible or achievable.

- At the Newton Public Schools, we face two dilemmas. We want to keep all our aging neighborhood elementary schools, and we want to rebuild eight of them soon. With declining enrollment and the requirement for a balanced budget, we need to make choices on the how, the what, the where and the when. Simultaneously, we see first-hand the increasing complexity of student needs, persistently rising costs growing faster than City revenues, potential threats to federal funding, and likely constrained state funding. This is creating tension between our profound commitment to our children's education and the financial realities of our taxpayers and our City.

The context in which we must do this work and make these decisions is always challenging but even more so today.

One reason is familiar. **While our City finances are strong, our revenues are growing modestly.** That means we must continue to live within our means and so our investments - which include programs, services, initiatives, contracted work and personnel (both the number of employees and our compensation packages) - must also grow modestly.

A second reason is the reality that a lot is changing quickly in Washington D.C., impacting people across our country and right here in Newton.

The values we hold dear in Massachusetts and in Newton may not be shared by those in charge in our capital. Senator Markey called me this afternoon and while he and Senator Warren and Congressman Auchincloss will continue to stand up for us, we may not have access to the same amount of federal funding for housing, education, transportation, climate resiliency, or human services in the days, weeks, months or years ahead. Our investments may be forced to change; our ability to advance our goals for our planet and our people may not move forward as quickly as we planned nor on the scale we would like.

Regardless, our values will endure. We will care for each other. Our commitment to making residents, workers and visitors welcome, safe and secure in Newton regardless of where they were born will remain. Our respect for people who live and work here - regardless of how or whether they choose to pray, their ancestry or country of origin, the color of their skin, the language they speak, who they love and how they identify - is unshakeable.

Let me close tonight by **sharing reflections from the outgoing Surgeon General of the United States, Dr. Vivek Murthy.** I was recently in the audience when Dr. Murthy spoke movingly in his final public speech.

He focused on the central question he had been grappling with during his two terms as Surgeon General: **What is the deeper root cause of the unhappiness he encountered so often across the United States?**

After years of study, conversations and reflection, with input from experts across disciplines and analysis of data, he narrowed his answer down to three essential elements that fuel well-being: **relationships, service and purpose.** For too many, these three elements are in too short supply.

Surgeon General Dr. Murthy said that the first, relationships, are a powerful source of joy, support and resilience. The second, service, from formal volunteering to informal, small, quick acts of kindness, foster connections and bind us to each other. The third, purpose, gives our lives direction and meaning. As a doctor, this triad of relationships, purpose and service is his prescription for the country for reducing the risk of a wide range of illnesses from heart disease and hypertension to anxiety and depression, as well as cognitive decline and early death.

The Surgeon General shared data documenting how all three elements have diminished in the lives of Americans. Approximately 33% of adults and 50% of young people are struggling with loneliness today. A majority of people in our country are not engaged in either formal or informal service to each other. Likewise, a majority of young adults say that they have little or no sense of purpose or meaning in life.

Dr. Murthy closed by saying that relationships, service and purpose not only underpin personal fulfillment, but also serve as the core pillars of community.

My observations while serving as a City Councilor for eight years and now as Mayor for seven confirm Dr. Murthy's diagnosis. Relationships, service, and purpose are critical contributors to a healthy community.

I do not know for certain what lies ahead on the national stage.

I am quite certain, though, that for all of us here in Newton, that for the state of the City of Newton to remain strong, we must double down on relationships that sustain us, on service that connects us, and on purpose that guides us.

Thank you and good night.

Mayor Ruthanne Fuller



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

[Unsubscribe](#) | [Update Profile](#) | [Constant Contact Data Notice](#)



Try email marketing for free today!