

STATE OF THE CITY 2020: A NEW PROVIDENCE

Good evening President Matos, Members of the City Council, our Providence Community, and City Staff.

I stand before you today as Mayor of a city that is very different from the one I grew up in. It is a city that still honors its past but it is a city that's charting a new path at the same time. We are in the midst of creating a New Providence, one built on shared values and on a forward-thinking openness to what the future has in store.

As I mentioned, I grew up in a Providence that was very different from the one we see today. For all of its strengths, Providence was a place where finances were mismanaged, where neighborhood parks went untended, and where infrastructure was neglected. In my teenage years, Providence was a city where crime was too high, downtown was desolate after dark, and our main corridors, sources of so much neighborhood pride, steadily declined.

But now, as we find ourselves in the year 2020 at the dawn of a new decade, we are part of an emerging national trend where cities have become the best-run level of government, the centers of innovation and progress, and the source of continued hope for our country as a whole. So, it is with both the weight of responsibility and the optimism of opportunity that we, together, are creating the New Providence.

And let me share with you what this New Providence entails. The New Providence is a place known for honesty and integrity in the way it runs its affairs and professional in the way it operates; it is a place known for being open-minded in the way it plans and forward-thinking in the way it invests; a place that is compassionate and inclusive in the way that it treats folks, and a place that believes, most of all, in its people.

In today's City Hall, integrity is key. We are professionals who treat our residents and businesses as customers and provide them best-in-class city services. Gone are the days when you had to know-a-guy to get a pothole filled.

We hit the ground running five years ago. We addressed a backlog of 3,000 complaints and we've now completed over 55,000 cases through the PVD311 system. By using technology, we have engaged thousands of residents who have sent us their concerns and we are more responsive to each complaint that comes in than the city has ever been.

We've provided our frontline staff with the customer service training they need so that every employee remembers, and that every constituent feels, that we are here to serve them.

In this New Providence we carry that professionalism in all that we do, from removing snow to the financial decisions we make every day. The New Providence takes our fiscal responsibility seriously and we budget realistically. Because of that change in mindset, we have been able to eliminate our deficit years ahead of schedule, we have built up a real rainy day fund, our credit rating has improved, and we're better-positioned today than at any time in modern history to tackle the challenges of the future.

The New Providence addresses challenges proactively by not putting band-aids on our problems, and by rebuilding our city from the ground up. Working with the City Council, we've committed to making the largest infrastructure investment in recent history with half a billion dollars in planned investments over the next five years. And, we're not just re-building what was already in place; instead, we're building smart to meet the needs of the future.

In the New Providence, the car is no longer king and we build our infrastructure to account for all of the ways that our roads can be used because we want every street to be truly great, meaning that they're safe, sustainable, and equitable.

When I was a child, the street was our football field. The sidewalks were out of bounds and the light posts were the endzones. But today, parents tell me that they're afraid to let their kids play in the streets. Our vision is to design our streets and sidewalks to slow cars down and make it more convenient to walk, ride a bike, and even play. Streets make up about 13% of our city's land and we want every one of our streets to be a Great Street.

In the New Providence, we do not think of neighborhoods in isolation but rather, every neighborhood is part of something greater than itself. And it's not just about improving existing connections, it's about making new ones and connecting people to new places. We are cultivating our urban trail network to connect every neighborhood to Manton Ave and back again; we are building City Walk to connect Fox Point to Elmwood and Washington Park; we have shaped the 6/10 road work to reconnect Olneyville to Downtown and the West Side.

And in perhaps the most vivid example of connecting people through infrastructure, our new pedestrian bridge (which I look forward to naming after a great human being) literally links two sides of our city, links people and communities to each other, and links our past to our future. It has become a destination where our residents are sharing experiences and building memories together. That's exactly the power of great infrastructure and precisely why we have to build connections throughout the city.

We are not afraid to think big and be bold. And while change can be hard at times, we must embrace it because preserving the status quo is simply not an option. Time moves on and instead of being left behind, the New Providence leads the way!

Thirty years ago, downtown was a place for our business community during the day, little more than nightclubs in the evening, and the interests of downtown were often pitted against that of our neighborhoods. Today, downtown is a destination that's vibrant with foot traffic, full of new restaurants and bars, brought to life with public art and festivals, and whose charm is being fully rediscovered. People have been moving back into cities for the past 20 years and they want to be as close to the city center as possible. With hundreds of residential units under construction, we are seeing that people are embracing this New Providence and making our downtown a 24/7 live, work, play district. It is our collective downtown, for residents and visitors, that has something to offer for everyone.

People are thirsty for connections to each other; for community and camaraderie. But we've seen that over the years, our city did not keep up its investments in public spaces to make that possible. We have over 100 parks in our city but many of them had not been improved upon since they were built in the 1970s. This is unacceptable to us and in partnership with the City Council, we've beautified our parks, programmed events within them, and we've made our greenspaces central to our New Providence. And, I'll tell you why that's so important.

For one, most of our families do not have sprawling backyards with beautiful green grass where their kids can run around and play. For most of our families, our parks are their backyards and we believe, as a matter of equity, that everyone should have access to greenspace. That's why we committed to having every child in the city live within a 10 minute walk of a beautiful public park. We are just about there and when we reach that goal, we will be only the third city in the country to have achieved it.

Second, our parks are important to us because parks bring people together. When I was young, my father played soccer and I remember spending almost every weekend at Merino Park. It's fair to say that at that time, Merino Park and its soccer leagues were the center of the Guatemalan community. It's where families came together to enjoy our free time, and where all the kids played and got to know each other. It was also a place where new arrivals learned where to find work and where entrepreneurs in our community got their starts selling tamales, chuchitos and horchata. I remember those days vividly because as a child it gave me the space to run around and be free but also because as a child, I felt like I was part of a village, where we all looked out for each other, and we belonged.

Our parks must continue to play that role if we're going to keep this idea alive that we are all part of this same village. The New Providence is a place where community is created in celebrations at Fargnoli, in football games at Bucklin, in festivals at Donigian, in beer gardens in Burnside, trick or treating at Brown Street, in concerts and festivals at Roger Williams, and in activities at all the 100+ little village centers that are scattered throughout our city. And for those reasons, our park system is not just important but it is essential to our New Providence.

Our city invests in community but we never lose sight of what makes up our community: and that's our people. For decades, we've known that our schools have been failing our kids. Both in terms of our school buildings and our classroom instruction, we collectively grew either so discouraged or so complacent, that we stopped demanding more. But in the New Providence, we take on the most thorny and difficult issues. To be sure, we've made attempts as a city, both in my administration and in prior ones, but we never managed to break through and bring about the change that was needed. It is with that in mind that over two years ago, I called for not just an improvement, but an entire transformation of education in our city. I stood in this very room and was shouted down but I never abandoned my belief that we needed a wholesale transformation of our district. And that is what lead us down the path of this great and necessary undertaking in our public schools today.

Aided by the overwhelming support of 86% of voters, we approved the largest school infrastructure investment in not just the City's, but in the State's history. After decades of neglect, and with strong support of our City Council, our kids will finally study in classrooms designed for 21st century learning. And with the State's intervention in our schools, we are working in partnership to ensure that now is the moment when our school transformation begins.

Even with the uncertainty that comes with a total district turnaround, our commitment to public education remains as firm as it has ever been. We understand that kids spend only 20% of their waking hours in school and the New Providence sets out to transform not just the "school" system but the "education" system. We take a holistic approach that invests comprehensively in out-of-school time and integrates wellness and mental health directly into the mix.

We have set out to create a rich environment for kids regardless of where they are. We have made major investments in summer learning programs, summer jobs, and \$5 a week summer camps that now serve thousands of families a year. We've invested in PASA, our libraries, and Providence Talks so they can serve and inspire more kids. We opened two new recreation centers, we've renovated others, provided new programming, and increased the number of hot meals served from 3,000 to over 120,000! We're encouraging Free Play and serving meals in our parks so that kids stay active, healthy and safe.

We've brought school culture coordinators and mental health professionals into our schools so that our kids feel supported and are learning about self-care, empathy and wellness at a young age. And one of our great partners in this work has been Rose Molina and her Kindness Crew at Juanita Sanchez. Rose has worked over the past few years to create a space for our students to not only talk about kindness, but to spread kindness. They have been incredible partners in our City of Kindness initiative and they are role models on how to spread it throughout the city. Rose can you please stand up. Let's give Rose and her crew a round of applause for all of their work.

The New Providence takes an integrated approach to treating the whole child and we're not done yet. We know that many of our kids, through no fault of their own, are already behind by the time they start kindergarten. Early learning programs are expensive and beyond the reach of so many of our families. Because of that, we have set a goal of providing universal Pre-K so that every child is ready to learn by the age of five. And before this term is up, we will achieve that goal.

We have made investments in our young ones but we haven't forgotten about the rest of our residents. The New Providence's economy is still transitioning from an industrial, manufacturing base to a knowledge and technology base. In this new economy, there is no doubt that the greatest asset we have is the creative and entrepreneurial spirit of our people. We now offer programs like PVD Self Employment and Design Catalyst to support our entrepreneurs and make sure that no one is left out of our growth and progress.

We are catering to our natural strengths rebuilding our economy with an eye towards the future. We have the first off-shore windfarm in America being built right here and now expanding in Providence; we have a glimpse into the future of agriculture in Gotham Greens as part of a food corridor along the Woonasquatucket River; we have a best-in-class innovation center in CIC Providence as an anchor to our knowledge district; and all of this is bolstered by the density of talented, creative people living throughout our city.

In the New Providence, cranes and work crews have become a fixture as there have been more construction projects than we have seen in modern history and it's spread out to all of our neighborhoods. We've seen development such as the Bomes Theatre on Broad Street, the Castle Theater on Chalkstone Avenue, Urban Greens on Cranston Street, and Farm Fresh in Olneyville; all of them on sites that were vacant and blighted not too long ago.

It is said that success begets success. There are hundreds of new apartments under construction and so many more exciting projects that are working their way through the pipeline. People are seeing the potential in this New Providence and they want to be a part of it.

Much of this success is due to the fact that we have embraced change and have refused to be left behind.

We have changed how we do business: cutting red tape, digitizing licenses and permits, streamlining procurement, creating a business concierge, revamping our business loan fund, and eliminating 90% of forms, which were deemed unnecessary. And the resounding message we are communicating to the world is that whether you are a person with an idea, a seasoned business owner, a local from around the corner, or a visionary from across the globe - the New Providence is a place for you.

We want you to know that we are serious about building a strong foundation and we're investing for the long haul. We know that climate change is one of the greatest threats facing our community which is why the New Providence is committed to sustainability and resilience. And facing the added reality that we cannot rely on federal partnership in this space, despite the support of our delegation, we are proud to lead by example. Whether it is in divesting our pension fund from the "filthy 15" highest-polluting companies, being the first in the state to convert all of our streetlights to energy-efficient LED bulbs, powering 70% of our public buildings using solar energy, banning single-use plastic bags, opposing the construction of fossil fuel plants or projects that harm our environment, or dedicating \$10M to upcoming infrastructure work, the New Providence is walking the walk and is leading on sustainability.

But we don't stop there. In fact, what most represents the New Providence approach and commitment to sustainability is our recently released Climate Justice Plan. This plan not only sets ambitious and actionable goals, but it does so by centering the voices of our low-income communities of color who are on the frontlines of climate change. They stand to feel the harmful impacts of climate change first, yet they are often the last to be consulted. Here in our city however, they set the agenda, they set the priorities, and they've produced this plan that has received national attention as a model for other cities to follow. I'd like to ask members of the Racial and Environmental Justice Committee who led much of this work, to please stand so that we can thank you for your leadership.

In the New Providence, we take a people-centered approach to every aspect of the work we do. Now, in some respects, this New Providence we are creating has been in the works for quite a while. In fact, we have built off of the work of past administrations to continue driving this vision forward. Nowhere is this more true than in the work being done by public safety.

When I took office, we made the decision to double-down and continue investing in our community policing strategy. Under Mayor Cicilline, the city took the bold step to transform the police department into a community-oriented one. There were real challenges to overcome and real battles were fought. But the city believed then, as it does now, that the most effective crime-reduction strategy is the one that works collaboratively and proactively to prevent it. People from my generation and older remember a time when it wasn't this way and it was rare to see an officer interacting pleasantly with young people in the city, especially young people of color. As a teenager growing up in Providence, I personally had multiple experiences with police where I was insulted, frisked, and even shoved unnecessarily. And my experience is no different than that of thousands of kids growing up in Providence in the 80s and 90s.

All of this began to change when Dean Esserman took the helm of the police department. A new approach was born and community partners were brought into the fold. I am proud to say that because of that turning point and the continuation of that work by Chief Clements, our city is experiencing one of its safest periods in history. Last year, total crime was at an all-time low, and over the past five years, shootings have been reduced by over 60%, burglaries have declined 55%, and we have seen some of the lowest homicide rates in almost 50 years in our city.

It is because of our partnerships, with organizations like the Nonviolence Institute and other community partners that we have been able to achieve these tremendous results of keeping our community safe and our kids alive.

I'd like to ask Chief Dean Esserman, Chief Hugh Clements and representatives from the Institute to please stand and receive our gratitude for ushering in and sustaining our New Providence approach to public safety.

While there is so much to celebrate in this New Providence, it would be disingenuous to not point out some of the lingering and emerging challenges we face. From growing pension and healthcare expenses, housing displacement and homelessness, substance abuse and overdose deaths, and the growing anger and division in our society, our city faces many challenges. There's no doubt about that.

But there is also no doubt that we are better positioned to address these challenges than we've been in decades and we will continue to confront them head on. Our finances have improved, giving us the flexibility to address our long-term needs. Our housing challenges are significant but we're acting earlier than other cities and can still prevent the displacement and inequality that others have seen. Substance abuse, suicide and overdoses are silent killers but there is growing awareness and knowledge on how to take them on.

Regardless of what the challenge is, the New Providence will meet the urgency of the moment. Guided by our values of integrity and professionalism; being open-minded and forward-thinking; tech-savvy and data-driven; kind and compassionate; people-centered and inclusive; bold and creative; and above all, always looking out for one another; we will achieve our audacious goal of being the best mid-sized city in America. We are on our way, we have work to do, and I look forward to doing that work with you, together!

Thank you, and God bless the New Providence!