

Investing in Our Future by Investing in Our People

Good evening and thank you for joining us tonight. I would like to begin by thanking my family, Stephanie and Omar for being here to support Daddy. I love you both!

I would like to thank my colleagues in government, Council President Sabina Matos and the entire city council for your leadership and service to our city.

I want to thank my team here in City Hall and all of the department directors who do the hard work of running our departments and inspiring our employees every day.

I want to thank our entire workforce, the police officers, the firefighters, the teachers, the laborers, the clerks, and everyone who has dedicated their careers to serve the city.

I want to thank our state and federal delegations. Without your help at the statehouse and in Congress, we wouldn't be able to do so much of the work that we do here at the local level.

And most of all, I want to thank the residents of Providence for supporting me and for believing in the vision we've laid out for our city. We've run this city with integrity and purpose, with boldness and vision. What we have in Providence, is a city on the rise and a future that hasn't been this bright in a very long time.

Yet, despite all the progress that we've seen, there are still persistent challenges. As I have come to understand the role of mayor at an ever deeper level, I've come to appreciate that the buck always stops at the mayor's office. As municipal leaders, we don't have the luxury to pontificate or point partisan fingers like the pundits on TV.

Our job is to solve problems regardless of where they come from. Whether it's public safety, immigration, infrastructure, substance abuse, or otherwise, we at the local level suffer the consequences of broken systems, so it doesn't help for us to complain, point fingers, or wish for a different world. Instead, we roll up our sleeves, dive into the challenges, and get stuff done for our constituents.

Over the past five years, I've spoken a great deal about One Providence; the idea that we are all on the same team, regardless of where in the city we live. And over the next three and a half years, I plan to talk about it even more because it is the most important challenge that we face in our community and, I believe, in our world as well.

We've all watched our national politics become a side show where a lot is said and little is done. We hear cries of young people who feel disconnected and of seniors who feel isolated. We hear the cries of people of color who feel forgotten and of a working class that feels left behind. In the age of social media, we ironically feel less connected to each other and the divisions between us run deep. All the while, diseases of despair such as loneliness, anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and suicide are all on the rise. So, my challenge to all of us is how we are going to fill the void that exists, help connect our residents to each other, and build that sense of community that is being threatened?

As humans, we are all looking for meaning and purpose in our lives and nothing helps us find that meaning and purpose more than a connection to something greater than ourselves. As I present the fiscal year 2020 budget, I do it with an eye towards supporting each other, looking out for each other, leaving no one behind, and creating that sense of community.

Last summer, I visited an employment site for our summer jobs program. I was able to see what our young people were up to and talk to them about their experience. As we were talking, I asked two young adults what they did with their first paycheck and I will never forget their answers. The first young woman told me that she gave her first paycheck to her mom to help with the rent, and the second young man told me that he used his first paycheck to buy his father a new pair of shoes. I could not have been prouder of those two young adults, and I could not have been prouder of the investments that the city made in them. When we invest in them, they not only get a great experience, but our young people show us their best selves by paying it forward to their families and their communities.

I can't think of a better way to create a strong and resilient community than by investing in our young people and that's why this budget calls for an increased investment in summer jobs and internships so that we will now triple the number of jobs that we offered just 5 years ago.

It is no secret that 85% of our kids qualify for free or reduced lunch. But in this country, being born poor should not be a life-sentence to remaining poor. We want our kids to have the same opportunities as kids from upper-middle class families: we want our kids to go to the best preschools too, to the best summer programs, and to have the best internships.

That's why we are proposing investments in pre-K and "Providence Talks" so that kids are ready to learn by the time they start kindergarten. That's why we propose additional support for PASA so that kids are safe and stimulated after school. This budget invests in summer learning and summer camps so that thousands of kids keep learning and growing throughout the summer. We're providing continued support for PVD Young Makers so that our kids aren't just playing with virtual reality but are actually creating virtual reality worlds right in our libraries. Our kids are the next generation of leaders and by investing in them today, they will be the leaders that keep our community together in the future.

I want to take a moment and recognize one particular future leader, Leslyann Oquendo. Leslyann is a senior at JSEC and she has participated in PASA since middle school. As a child, she always loved math, but she used her experiences at PASA to explore other subjects. Because of her participation in PASA, Leslyann was able to explore arts and design and she soon discovered that she loved that just as much. If it hadn't been for the broad array of options at PASA, Leslyann the middle school student would have seen a much more limited range of possibilities for herself. But with her Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Math interests, I'm proud to share that Leslyann will be taking her talents to Smith College next year on scholarship to study engineering. We're proud of you, Leslyann!

We want our kids and our families to know that we have their back. Just last year, voters overwhelmingly approved a school infrastructure investment and we will now begin \$400M worth of improvements to our school buildings over the next decade. Our kids will begin to see a marked difference when they walk into a school building. They'll be able to look around and see that our city is prioritizing them.

As they look around, they'll also see a city that's willing to think outside the box and do whatever it takes to help them succeed. This budget proposes a pilot program where we will install washing machines in our schools as an approach to address chronic absenteeism. We will also build off of last year's investment in menstrual health and make a broader investment in women's health and in mental health in our schools. We want to eliminate every barrier that keeps kids from thriving in school so that their focus remains on what it should: academics and personal growth.

This budget proposes increased funding to our school department, the second time in three years, so that we can continue investments in school culture coordinators, professional development, technology, and multi-language learners.

Our school culture coordinators have helped create a strong sense of community and built connections with our kids in the schools. That's why I am proud to say that we will once again invest in people like Carina Monge so that they can continue to form connections with our students. If any of you know Carina, you know that her positive attitude is contagious and her ability to connect with our kids is unbelievable. During her time in the school, she has introduced "power lunches" to get our kids up and active during their lunch period. She helped form the first LGBTQ club, she converted her office into a quiet room for kids, she introduced new programming, brought new community speakers, and is helping to bridge the gap between families and school administrators. Can we all take a moment to recognize Carina, her fellow coordinators, and the incredible work they do in our schools?!

We are investing in multi-language learners. If you spend a day at Leviton Elementary School, you would see the incredible power of dual-language programs. In these programs, kids learn all their material in English one week and then they learn all their material in Spanish the following week. These programs create young adults that are ready for the multi-cultural world that awaits them. When I took office, there was only one dual-language program. With an additional expansion this year, we will now have four dual-language programs where kids will become fluent in English and Spanish by the time they graduate.

Nothing brings us together better than supporting our kids and knowing that our future is in good hands.

Homes not Just Houses

Now, while we invest in our kids, we must also invest in our neighborhoods. The most destabilizing threat to a community is when its members believe that they will no longer be part of it in the future. These past three years have seen significant increases in property values and rents throughout every part of the city. And if we want to keep our community intact today, then our residents have to know that there will be a place for them and their families in the Providence of tomorrow. Simply put, our families need affordable places to live.

Over the past 5 years, we've seen over 500 abandoned houses fixed through our Everyhome program. That's 500 more homes for our city; 500 homes that will no longer blight our neighborhoods; 500 homes where real people now live. But we have to do more!

Working with President Matos, we've identified housing as a major priority for the coming years. There are two important ordinances working their way through the city council: one on Source of Income discrimination and one to fund the Housing Trust. These two measures will help our residents find homes and stay in them.

This coming year, we invite the community to be part of our Housing Summit so that, together, we develop a long-term strategic plan for housing in the city. Included in this budget, we are funding a robust community engagement process. Starting with our housing summit this fall—we will work to make sure that every Providence parent has access to an affordable home; every family can feel secure in their apartment; every college student can return to the city they grew up in; and every senior can enjoy their golden years with their grandchildren. If you care about the future of your community, we ask you to be involved in this process.

Investments in Infrastructure

As a new parent myself, the future has taken on even greater importance. I want my child to fall in love with our city and I want him to be inspired to living here as an adult. When we invest in infrastructure, we pay for the cement, bricks and mortar, but it is the space above, the space within, and the space around that actually gets used. The purpose of great infrastructure is to invite the public to come out and enjoy it together. Over the past 20 years, as we have short-changed these investments, it's not just the pavement, the sidewalks, and the roofs that have suffered, it is our connection to each other and a sense of community that has suffered the most.

Our vision is for new moms to join each other for walks, pushing strollers while enjoying the convenience of intact sidewalks with curb-cuts at every corner. For parents to let their kids play outside with other kids, confident that well-designed streets will reduce speeding and keep their kids safe. For friends to jump on an e-bike and follow a dedicated lane to a part of town they had never visited before. For children to choose city sports leagues, knowing that they'll have the best playing fields in the entire state. And, for neighbors to meet at a park as they appreciate a piece of public art or simply watch their kids play on a new playground.

Great infrastructure draws people together and this budget helps us build the great community that we all want. From traditional roads to off-road trails; from public buildings to public parks; and from engaging artwork to transit networks; this budget calls for \$70M of investments over the next 2 years that will bring our community together and make us stronger.

Our city believes in this approach and we also believe in investing directly in people. Initiatives such as PVD Self Employment and the Design Catalyst program are supporting our entrepreneurs that then repay their community by expanding their business and hiring our residents. We support the A Hand Up Program that offers jobs to the homeless and helps them get their lives on track, and we support immigrants in our community, documented and otherwise, by offering IDs and expanding our Newcomer Academy.

We have to act locally to address national challenges. We know that America has the worst rate of maternal deaths in the developed world and that it disproportionately affects mothers of color. Inspired by the advocacy of elected leaders at the statehouse and our city council, we are rolling up our sleeves as a city to help find a solution. This budget supports the creation of a pilot program to provide doula services to expecting mothers, so they can bring their children into this world surrounded by the best possible care. And while the scourge of drug addiction continues to spread across the United States, our Safe Stations continue to save lives for those most in need.

We know that being part of a community means that we're both investing in each other and invested in each other's success. When the most vulnerable among us, such as children, immigrants, the homeless, and new parents succeed, our entire city succeeds along with them.

Bear in mind that the very purpose of cities is to bring people together. And, there is perhaps no greater expression of this in Providence than our annual PVDfest celebration. Together, we shine the spotlight on our artists and celebrate with 100,000 of our closest friends. When I think of the places where our kids will someday want to live, I cannot think of a better image than that of strangers dancing in the street, young and old, rich and poor, black, brown and white all enjoying themselves together. That is PVDfest and that is Providence.

The work that we've done over the years is truly remarkable. The most violent crime is down to historic lows, young people are engaged throughout the summer, new businesses have opened shop, there are cranes in the sky, tourism is up, and our park system is a source of pride. We are indeed a city on the rise.

Yet, when I talk to people from throughout the state, there is still a perception of our city that is about 30 years past due. Their perception of Providence is still stuck in the 80s: they believe it is unsafe, that there's nothing going on, and that it should be avoided. But nothing could be further from the truth. We have an amazing story to tell and no one is going to tell the story for us. This budget calls for a regional campaign to change Rhode Islanders' impression of their capital city. Let's invite them to visit our neighborhoods, support our local businesses, and see all that our amazing city has to offer. We in Providence have a big heart and if you support our city, there's a place for you in our community. Come visit us, I guarantee that you will fall in love!

We are a city that lives on the cutting edge. Whether it is autonomous busses in Olneyville that offer free rides, the PVD311 app that connects everyone to City Hall, 3D printers at every library, or the upcoming arrival of the Cambridge Innovation Center, innovation has become a staple of the way we operate. Through our Innovation Initiative in City Hall, we have been able to deliver the best city services to residents and make life easier for business owners, while also saving the city hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of dollars. This budget proposes an expansion of the Innovation Initiative to the school and police departments so that we continue to position our city on the cutting edge of municipal innovation.

Bold Goals for Our Future

While many of us bemoan the state of politics in the world today, I, personally, have become more optimistic about the direction in which our country and our politics is heading. Let me explain why. I too am concerned about the partisanship, and now extremism, in national politics. But as Washington has descended deeper into disarray, cities throughout the country have stepped up to fill the leadership void. Today, almost all of the innovative, forward-thinking work in government is happening at the local level. And regardless of the issue, in the face of federal inaction, Providence is part of a large network of cities that is stepping up to meet the needs of our constituents. We are lowering crime, investing in our people, building great public infrastructure, encouraging development, and leading on sustainability. All the while, we act intentionally with compassion and kindness as we deliver on what we've been elected to do.

But most of all, our unique responsibility at the local level is to find ways to bring our community together. You know that at the local level, we cannot hide behind tweets or merely communicate via television. We know our constituents by name, we see them at the supermarket, we're in constant touch with them, and we're directly accountable to them. They trust us, they believe in us, and they're counting on us!

We cannot wait for Washington to come and save us; it's not going to happen. Instead, I believe that the course of our country, no less, will be determined by the work done by folks like us. As the forces that divide us become stronger, let us be the force that brings people together. Let us take bold action when others won't. Let us - One Providence - be the force that creates the community our people deserve.

Thank you, God Bless!