

A meeting of the Board of Aldermen was held Tuesday, February 18, 2020, at 7:00 p.m. in the City Hall Auditorium.

President Lori Wilshire presided; City Clerk Susan K. Lovering recorded.

Prayer was offered by City Clerk Susan K. Lovering; Alderman Skip Cleaver led in the Pledge to the Flag.

The roll call was taken with 14 members of the Board of Aldermen present; Alderwoman Shoshanna Kelly was recorded absent.

Mayor James W. Donchess and Corporation Counsel Steven A. Bolton were also present.

MAYOR'S ANNUAL STATE-OF-THE-CITY ADDRESS

Mayor Donchess

Welcome everybody to City Hall and Good Evening President Wilshire, Vice President O'Brien, Senator Rosenwald, thank you Cindy, Members of our School Board, Members of our Fire and Police Departments, our BPW, Police Commission, Members of our Legislative Delegation, School Board Members and City Division Directors and Staff and Community Members.

My heart is full of gratitude to the people of Nashua for again giving me the opportunity and privilege of serving our City. Thank you to my wife Vicky for being here tonight and for all of the support and inspiration which you and Carolyn and David and our two young grandsons have given me.

Each time I prepare for a State of the City address, it is a chance to reflect on the City and on the progress that we have made together. And I can say with confidence that Nashua is a City on the rise. By working together over the last four years, side-by-side with the Board of Aldermen and with many other Nashuans, our Boards and Commissions, our non-profit sector and our business community, we have established a meaningful, measurable record of results. Thank you to our 2,800 city employees, because you too are crucial to Nashua's success. Teachers, Police Officers, Fire Fighters, DPW Workers, City Hall Employees, Library Staff and all others, who work hard every day to serve the people of Nashua.

Richard Florida, who for decades, has studied the regeneration, revitalization and renewal of cities has written, "The key thing that distinguishes thriving places of any and all sizes, is surprisingly simple. Successful places are intentional". Nashua is on the rise because Nashuans are working hard together to move Nashua ahead. In Nashua we are intentionally building a thriving City. And I say "together" because in all that we do, my commitment is for more conversation, more cooperation, more collaboration and more common sense.

Infrastructure is critical and our streets are a part of our Infrastructure that everyone uses. You deserve City streets which are paved, and are maintained. For year ago, many of our streets were crumbling and after years of neglect, people were skeptical that Nashua's streets would ever be fixed. One man stopped me on Concord Street and said, "Concord Street will never be paved". Many also doubted that Kinsley Street would ever be repaired.

But today we are in the midst of a Citywide, multi-year, \$41 million dollar paving plan of action. We have repaved 70 miles of streets and crack sealed 46 miles, neighborhood and arterial streets including both Kinsley Street and Concord Street.

Over the past four years we have also invested in repairing and upgrading the Wastewater Treatment Plant. This Infrastructure work has included replacement of the headworks, upgrades to the primary tanks, the secondary clarifiers and the aeration tanks and new dryers for the sludge. We have also replaced or lined over 10 miles of sewers and we've added 2.5 acres of land to the Wastewater Treatment Plant which will provide expansion space necessary for phosphate treatment if and when that is required.

Commuter Rail – for Nashua and New Hampshire is critical as a means to a stronger, healthier economy; as a tool for our businesses to attract new employees and as a better alternative for Nashuans who travel to Boston. By working with our Legislators, we have made long sought progress on Commuter Rail for Nashua. Last Spring, the Legislature authorized the final planning phase of the Capital Corridor Rail Project. The New Hampshire DOT is now moving forward. 35% of New Hampshire's State Domestic Product is generated right here in Nashua and Manchester. The State needs to realize that linking us to Boston will create a healthier economy for the entire State of New Hampshire.

As in the rest of the country, many Nashua families are living paycheck to paycheck and I get it. It can be hard to come up with the money to pay the property tax bill. So I am committed to effective and efficient City Government and to working to limit tax increases for Nashua homeowners and businesses. Nashua has been recognized for spending our tax dollars wisely. For two years running, Nashua has earned a spot on Wallet Hub's list of Best Run Cities in America, for delivering high quality services at an affordable cost. We must keep in mind that New Hampshire has high property taxes. In New Hampshire 2/3 of the total of State and Local Taxes are Property Taxes and that is the highest in the Nation. Over the last four years, here in Nashua, we have successfully limited tax increases to an average of 2.6% per year despite significant financial challenges created by the downshifting of cost by the State of New Hampshire.

The biggest single downshift happened when the State of New Hampshire broke the commitment that it made when it persuaded Nashua to join the State Pension System. The State's promise was to pay 35% of City Pension Cost. The State's violation of this pledge several years ago, has already cost Nashua Tax Payer's a cumulative total of almost \$50 million dollars. We now face the financial challenge of rapidly rising healthcare costs. Nashua is not alone. Healthcare costs across the Nation are unstable and are rising. This year, City healthcare costs rose 11% or \$3.3 million dollars. They will rise another \$3 million dollars next year. Our healthcare experts tell us that this trend will continue. We are taking aggressive steps to bend the curve on rising healthcare costs by encouraging employees to elect high deductible plans, by promoting the use of SmartShopper and by working on a new plan design for City Healthcare Benefits. But by itself, this two-year \$6,000,000.00 increase in health care costs equates to a 3% increase in the tax rate. So while City healthcare costs are rising at \$3 million dollars a year, the City's financial team and I have been recommending that we limit the approval of wage increases especially in longer term contracts to the cost of living. If we don't do this while healthcare costs are increasing so rapidly, then we will build non-sustainable budgets.

For an effective and efficient City Government, I will be making a new cost-saving proposal to the Board of Aldermen, as well as to our School and Police Departments. There are currently three information technology departments in the City; at City Hall, at the School Department and at the Police Department. Altogether, the three budgets total over \$6 million dollars and there is duplication. So at the next meeting of the Board of Aldermen, I will be proposing that we form a study group to recommend ways to consolidate the three IT functions and save tax dollars. This will require that our Departments be willing to cooperate, collaborate and relinquish a little control in order to improve efficiency and save money.

We are making an investment in Brine Technology which will produce savings in our annual salt budget and will keep our major streets freer of ice and snow in the winter months. We have fitted our Public Works Plow Trucks with brining equipment. When the temperature is above 20 degrees, Public Works can now apply brine to arterial streets within 24 hours before a blizzard starts, rather than spreading rock salt after the storm begins. Brining has already improved the conditions of major streets during snowstorms and Public Works estimates that we will save 20% on our salt budget every year.

I am excited about a new initiative we are working on, the opportunity to save Nashua families \$20 to \$25 million dollars or about \$600.00 per family in lower electric bills over the next four years through Community Choice Power. Community Choice Power was authorized by the Nashua Legislature last year. This Legislation enables the City to purchase electricity in bulk for all Eversource customers. Eversource will continue to distribute electricity using their poles and lines and will continue to bill customers. But Nashua consumers will see savings in their electric bills. The analysis done by the City's Energy Manager, Doria Brown, suggests that we can buy power for .16 cents per kilowatt hour, which is .2 cents less on average than Nashua customers are paying now. The City will also benefit by earning a 1/10th of a cent per kilowatt hour; funds which can be invested in green and energy efficient projects.

Four years ago, Nashua had not yet completed the job we began in 1988 when we opened half-day public kindergarten for the first time. But today, all of Nashua's five year olds are able to attend full-day public kindergarten at all 12 elementary schools. In Nashua we have over 11,000 students. We will continue our commitment to providing an excellent education for every student at every school, every day. Over the next four years, we will focus keenly on our Middle Schools, but replacing the aging Elm Street Middle School with a new school and campus and by renovating and reconfiguring the Pennichuck and the Fairgrounds Middle Schools.

Students in our schools speak over 60 languages. This year we added five English Language Learners teachers to help those students become fluent in English. But we need to keep a close watch on our ELL Program to ensure that we have enough teachers to meet the challenge of students who come to our schools speaking Spanish, Chinese, Portuguese, Swahili, Telugu, Hindi and many other languages.

A thriving downtown is critical to building a healthier economy. This truth applies in every City. When I go to the US Conference of Mayor's Meetings, it is clear that all successful Mayors are intently focused on their downtowns. When I was elected Mayor I committed to adding 500 new units of downtown housing and 1,000 new downtown residents within four years. We have achieved results. We have reached an exceeded the 500 unit commitment with the Lofts 34 conversation on Franklin Street; with Riverfront Landing on Bridge Street and with the affordable workforce housing complex on Marshall Street, as well as other smaller projects.

This new housing has added tens of millions of dollars to the downtown tax base and has added 1,000 new downtown residents who can patronize Main Street businesses.

Four years ago the banks of the Nashua River downtown were overgrown with weeds and with invasive species. We had no plan to change this sorry situation. Today, we have developed a Nashua Riverfront Master Plan and we are starting the work of revitalizing and rejuvenating the beauty of our Riverfront with lighting, suspended walkways, landscaping and docks. Four years ago, Pennichuck the water company which the City owns, had its headquarters out of town and many people ask, "why is this". And four years ago the Court House Oval in the center of downtown was sitting vacant. Today, Pennichuck has committed to coming back home and the company will be bringing 60 people to work at an expanded HQ in the Court House Oval.

Today our City has more life with Nu Muse and New England Roots Music Festivals; with the VEO Ride scooters and bikes; with a reactivated central fire station; with Dancing in the Streets; with the Main Street Farmer's Market and with our Pride Parades.

For more than three decades, we have been working towards a Downtown Performing Arts Center. I want to thank the Bank of America for recently committing to a leading gift of \$250,000.00 and Enterprise Bank for an important gift of \$100,000.00. Soon we will see a new marquee on Main Street and annually 70,000 people will be coming downtown to go to a performance at the new Performing Arts Center and to spend money dining and shopping.

We also have a plan to restore and renew the inactive green space between the Nashua Public Library and our Court Street Building. The design for this new park includes a great lawn, café seating, trees and landscaping and a small playground and basketball court. This is a project about which I and many other really excited. If you haven't seen the plan yet, you should check it out on-line.

Based upon the vision of one our millennial citizens, Amber Logue, we are working towards a downtown dog park, near the Mill yard entrance to Mine Falls Park. This will be an important amenity for all dog owners in our City. We are also moving forward to provide the protection of a fire suppression sprinkler system through the Court Street Central Fire Station including the Streeter Theater. This will make our Community Theaters safer for the Peacock Players, the Nashua Theater Guild and the kids and families who use that theater.

Our Arts Community and a thriving arts scene are critical to a successful downtown and critical to a successful City. The Picker Arts Group on the Pine Street Extension, our annual International Sculpture Symposium, the New Artist Studios in the Central Fire Station, the engaging murals around our downtown by Manny Ramirez and Positive Street Art and the Annual Art Show at Greely Park are all important contributors to our thriving art scene. This fall we will be working in partnership with the Currier Museum of Art on the first of an annual arts project in Nashua.

As I have said over the past four years we have added a lot of new downtown housing but we certainly need more. Housing a critical need for our residents, for our businesses and for a healthier economy. The vacancy rate for apartments is at a record low of 0.6%. Rents rose 19% over the last four years. We need to add more housing of all types; market rate and affordable apartments as well as single family homes.

In our emerging Railyard District east of Main Street we have approved plans for more than 200 units of new housing and we are beginning work on a new plan for the properties, some of them City-owned at the western end of the mill yard bordering Mine Falls Park. This is a promising site for homes for new downtown residents. We are working with Neighbor Works and with Habitat for Humanity, to create more affordable apartments and home ownership opportunities on Kinsley Street, Pine Street and on Paxton Terrace.

The Elm Street Middle School property may present another housing opportunity. We will be proposing a feasibility study, but once the new Middle School is completed, the 200,000 square foot Elm Street Middle School could be added to the tax rolls and could potentially provide hundreds of housing units for our people. However, we first need to develop a step by step plan regarding the future of Elm Street.

From Day 1, we have tackled the opioid crisis and there have achieved meaningful results. In February 2016 we convened the Mayor's Opioid Task Force. In November 2016 we launched the City's Safe Stations Program. Anyone who is seeking help can report to any Fire Station in Nashua any time and get help with an addiction. So far, over 3,000 have reported and have received treatment and help. The opioid crisis is still with us. And certainly one tragic death is one too many. But in 2019 fatal overdoses were down about 20% from the peak years of 2015 and 2016.

My personal commitment is to the City Government that you deserve, a City Government that is more accountable and inclusive. In order to be accountable, we have held Town Hal Style Meetings in every Ward every year. We have Coffee with the Mayor gatherings every month with a growing number of participants; the most recent just last week. These public forums are a great opportunity to discuss ideas and concerns. In Nashua we believe in mutual respect and we value and include all Nashuans, we do not divide people between us and them. We have just us, all Nashuans.

We have officially become a welcoming city. Our Cultural Connections Committee under the leadership of Deepa Mangalat and Sylvia Gale is reaching out to all of Nashua's Communities. We have resumed holding an annual fall event which we began when I was Mayor before, Nashua's Multicultural Festival. We have held two Pride Parades and we are looking forward to our third, which I predict will be bigger than our first two and that will be on June 27th.

This coming August, we are planning a celebration of the 100th Anniversary of Women's Suffrage, the passage of course of the 19th Amendment which granted women the right to vote. If you would like to get involved in that celebration, please talk to Cheryl Linder.

We are also working to build stronger neighborhoods. For the second year, we will be running our "Your Voice, Your Choice" project in the Tree Streets. This past year, with the help of Shaun Nelson and Nashua PAL, and working with neighborhood residents, we developed ideas for about a dozen possible projects. Then neighborhood residents voted to determine which project should go ahead. Tree Street residents voted for a project we had never thought of and that is a Futsal Court, which is an enclosed soccer court which is on Ash Street, right across from PAL. Now that the Court is complete, it is a great place for kids to learn and strengthen their skills, right in the neighborhood. We are looking forward to working with Tree Street residents again this spring on our second "Your Voice, Your Choice" project.

At the Arlington Street Community Center in Crown Hill, Director Megan Caron along with volunteers are increasing opportunity for Nashua's kids. Volunteer retired teachers under the leadership of Trish Stansfield and Donna Dye are lifting up first, second and third graders from the Dr. Crisp School with the Skill Builders program. The volunteers with Skill Builders work with students after school to ensure that kids reading and math skills are at grade level. Also, volunteer future teachers from Rivier University are running a Pre-K Program for 4 year olds.

Four years ago we had no specific goals for reducing our carbon footprint. We lacked an urgent plan for a greener Nashua. Today, we have moved our green plan of action to the front burner. From talking with our young people I can tell you that they are committed to making a difference on climate change right here in Nashua. They know that their lives are and will be affected. We have adopted ambitious energy reduction goals; a 25% reduction in our carbon footprint by 2025 and carbon neutrality by 2050.

We have already converted all of our street lights to LED's. We have secured ownership over our two hydroelectric dams. We have hired the City's first Energy Manager to jumpstart green projects. We have fought and will keep fighting in Concord for expanded net metering legislation. We have our first hybrid electric buses. Working with ReVision Energy we have installed solar rays on the Lake Street Fire Station, the Transit Garage and the Conway Arena. We have more charging stations for electric vehicles and for more walkability, we are working on the extension of our rail trail to the new Railyard District east of Main Street.

Over the next four years, we will work with our schools, our Fire and Police Departments, and Public Works to reduce our carbon footprint. Right now, we are working with Shaun Smith and Dan Donovan of the Nashua School Department on a comprehensive plan to reduce energy use by 30% and save energy costs of at least \$500,000.00 per year at the Nashua North and Nashua South High Schools. This project includes LED lighting, upgraded temperature controls, new transformers and other energy efficient measures. At our two high schools, we will be able to reduce carbon emissions by over 3 million pounds per year.

And there is some good news from last night. The School Board authorized going forward with a solar array on the Dr. Crisp School, which I hope is the first of many solar projects at our schools.

The City will soon undertake a project vital to the future of Nashua and we want to enlist the entire community in this important collaborative effort. Imagine Nashua 2040, we will update the City's Master Plan and create a 21st Century Urban Vision aimed at providing guidance and direction for the future development of downtown, of our unique neighborhoods, of our green spaces, our transit system and transportation options, and of the zoning maps and land use codes.

Together, we will consider how to address the housing shortage at all levels of affordability. We will recommend how to bolster and strengthen the revitalizing arts, cultural and residential neighborhoods in our center City. We will consider the future of our parks and playgrounds, our playing fields and trail system of our conversation lands. All of our work and recommended initiatives will be in coordination with the net zero by 2050 goals, which the City has adopted to fight the climate crisis. And I hope that you will get involved with Imagine Nashua 2040 and help us create the vision for the future of our City.

Before I conclude, I want to mention something else that is important to any City and that is the local media. Newspaper and community radio stations across the nation have been struggling for a long time. The internet, Facebook, Google, Twitter – together they have had a major impact. But our local newspaper and our radio stations help to inform our residents about City Government and help to hold City Officials accountable. Our local media is helping to bring a stronger community. So I would like to give a shout out to the staff at the Telegraph, at FSMN and the Union Leader for fighting the good fight to keep Nashua informed and to keep Nashua together. I urge everyone to support our local news sources, because in the long run effective local media benefit everyone.

So working together we have done a lot together over the last four years but I know that Nashua's best is yet to come. As we look ahead to the next four years, I am ready to serve with energy, creativity, and hard work. I am personally committed to real solutions and real results. By continuing to work together, by valuing and supporting each other, we can realize our vision of making Nashua the best middle-sized City in America.

Thank you and God Bless.

ADJOURNMENT

**MOTION BY ALDERMAN O'BRIEN THAT THE FEBRUARY 18, 2020, MEETING OF THE BOARD OF ALDERMEN BE ADJOURNED
MOTION CARRIED**

The meeting was declared adjourned at 7:35 p.m.

Attest: Susan K. Lovering, City Clerk