



Mayor Daniel Rivera – 2019 State of the City

Good evening, Council President Vasquez, City Councilors, elected officials and fellow Lawrencians. To begin I would like to ask you to join me in a moment of silence for Jose “Pepe” Lopez our friend and colleague Martha Velez’s father who passed away this morning.

As we sit here tonight in the glow of yet another Super Bowl championship by the New England Patriots, and after witnessing another championship this past October by the Boston Red Sox, we can’t help but feel lucky to live in such a great place and time for professional sports in Massachusetts. I think too that we should all feel lucky to live in such a special place and time in our City of Lawrence, MA.

Five years ago, I came before the City Council for the first time as Mayor and said that the state of our City in 2014 was “hopeful”. Hopeful was the best that I could report. In February 2014 I had only been on the job 32 days and was still assessing the situation, but at that time our City was just not strong. Back 5 years ago financially, safety, education, economic development; in all these categories you could not accurately use the word strong describe our city. But today, a mere 1,825 days since then, I am proud to stand before you and report that yes, TODAY the state of our city is strong.

Many may say that the state of our city couldn’t possibly be strong given the Columbia Gas disaster of September 13th. The gas fires and explosions of September 13th, 2018 and the days that followed were both a human tragedy and a human disaster. What followed the devastations was loss of life, grave, unbearable injury to people, priceless loss to property and the regional loss of business and jobs. But worst of all, we lost the underlying security that the very thing most of us relied on to keep ourselves and our families warm in the coldest of New England winters could destroy our homes, our neighborhoods, our city, our very peace. We suffered and some are still suffering, but this disaster made us stronger. We, you and I, our residents, our state delegation and our federal delegation have fought against the cold bureaucracy of Columbia Gas to put people and their needs first, and fought to get through the disaster with dignity.

Our first responders, our police and firefighters fought to keep up safe in the darkest of nights and coldest of days. I am not sure what would have happened to our City if not for the firefighters of the Lawrence Fire Department and the professional posture and response of the Lawrence Police Department. All of our municipal employees who put down their city bureaucracies and became an army of first responders, aid and

humanitarian workers, from our Library Director, to the Economic Development Director, to the Director and staff at our Senior Center and our Community Development Department, to our City Councilors, to our State Representative; to the teachers and staff at our public schools and countless others, many of whom were affected themselves all pitched in. The Governor, his staff and his cabinet, seamlessly rolled up their sleeves and became an active, important part of these efforts. The State legislature and the federal delegation both made us feel as if our plight was the most important business before the Commonwealth. I have never been more proud to be associated with a group of people in my life. They all showed the spirit of government and its power to do good. And I want to thank all of you again for the work you did for the people of Lawrence. I know that we are not 100% back to normal, but today is better than yesterday and yesterday was better than the day before that...but Because of all of this work, all of this effort, because we had one another, because we leaned on one another, because we had nothing else but one another, we made it through the fire and today we are a stronger City. I want you to know that the 3 things I will promise you we will continue to fight for going forward from Columbia Gas are: 1. They will continue to make Lawrence effected and non-effected Columbia gas customers whole and comfortable and safe; 2. Curb to curb repaving of our streets and repair of sidewalks where mandated by state law, 3. They will make the City whole for loss of services, loss of revenue, and costs related to the September 13th gas disaster- they will pay for what they did.

Today we are safer than we were 5 years ago or even last year. Crime continues to drop in every category in every neighborhood across the City. With a 40% reduction in Part 1 Felony Crimes, which featured 44% reduction in shootings, 7 fewer homicides. This meant almost 200 fewer people had their cars stolen this year than last year. Almost 90 fewer people were robbed and the statistics all reflect this long march toward lower crime and less violence. However, I will confess that while the total number of incidents of crime continues to drop year after year, there persists a sense of insecurity in our community fueled by high profile cases, and the increase in the opioid drug trade. We are seeing success thanks to the tax payers of this City and the City Council. Our commitment to continue to grow the total number of Police Officers on the street makes us safer every day. We are currently budgeted for 147 officers, 14 more were added this past year. Now I realize that more police is not always the answer, but, it has made the difference in these last 5 years. We hope to reach a total number of 150 sworn officers by the end of FY 2020. Although not having had a full year as Chief, I don't think anyone can deny the impact on Crime, the impact on personnel, and the impact on the relationship with the community that our Chief, Roy Vasque, has had in our Police Department. Fighting crime smarter with cameras, and modern communication systems. Fighting crime proactively with the work of the Domestic Violence Liaison and a full time police officer assigned to our business community. Work like this, real community work, will result in the long term in having less crime, and ultimately make people feel safer.

I have also been working hard with our firefighters to ensure where they work and their equipment is the most modern and effective. In the last year, we have fixed a majority of the deteriorating floor at the Fire Department Central fire station on Lowell Street and we are currently in the middle of replacing the furnace and heating units there. We worked to implement a state of the art Dispatching software and state of the art portable radios. We replaced the department's Rescue Boat and had it painted with the help from the Greater Lawrence Technical School. We have also continued building up the total number of fire fighters. We hired 10 new firefighters and are currently staffed higher than the minimum manning we are obliged to provide by contract. On the matter of the contract with our Firefighters, I am happy to say that after years of negotiations, we have a contract for our firefighters that begins to correct the structural issues the contract has with what we as a community can afford to pay long term. In the end, we bargained in good faith and you have a contract before you that you should vote on tonight and fund.

In review of our financials, the only thing that you can surmise is that we are a financially stable city. All the important indicators will show you that the work that we have done, the policies that we have implemented have helped us climb out of our unstable financial situation. For the first time ever, the city has state certified free cash/ reserves of \$15.3 Million (largest in city history the largest free cash/ reserves in the City's history). We have continued to reduce the total amount of uncollected tax dollars' year to year and have collected more owed delinquent back taxes. Since I have been Mayor, we have collected almost two times the amount of back taxes collected in the two previous administrations; we have collected \$10,115,845 owed delinquent back taxes. New growth and property values continue to increase, and contrary to popular belief, according to MA Department of Revenue, Lawrence is among the lowest single family home tax rates in the Commonwealth for Cities our size. We will continue to do all the right things to ensure a strong financial future. Budget conservatively, spend wisely, and keep taxes low. We will also continue to invest in the capital needs with our 4th Capital Improvement Plan coming to you with the FY 2020 budget. You should know that if we pass the FY2020 budget on time and with no drama, it will be the 10th year in a row that we have passed balanced budgets and I believe it will be a telling sign to the State that the Overseer is no longer needed. We can do this together.

On the Economic Development front, I am happy to report to you that the Lawrence Industrial Park is almost full to capacity with hardly any empty commercial space. Mill space for commercial use and for housing is also hard to come by. For the first time in a very long time, the idea of empty commercial space is becoming a thing of the past. The newest tenant at the Industrial Park is Unitex, an industrial laundry company that brings with it 350+ jobs. Long term development projects are coming to a close with Merrimack St. paving

completing this spring. Tombarello site cleanup is progressing nicely and should be out for RFP in the near future. I am also happy to report that the 1-6 Showcase Cinema site is progressing smoothly. If you drive by there today you will see the animal hospital and the Starbucks are almost built out. When completed, not only will that be the home to THE premier state of the art animal hospital north of Boston, but also the home of the only drive-thru Starbucks in the Merrimack Valley. The other good news is that the 7-14 Showcase Cinema site across the street has also been bought by local immigrant entrepreneurs the Yopez Brothers who are working on the sites redevelopment as a place for medical office space. Both of these developments mean jobs for Lawrence people. Housing is still growing in the city with 5 large mill redevelopments (Franklin St. Pacific Mills Phase 2, & Pac Lofts Phase 1, Riverwalk Lofts Phase II, and the Van Brodie Mill) adding much needed low income and market rate units to the city. These mill developments, along with the downtown apartments, and much needed in-fill housing in the core will ensure that Lawrence fights gentrification and continues to be the Lawrence we have always been. But be clear about this, density is no longer a question of if we want it. Density is here and we must produce enough housing to deal with it or rents will continue to grow, and unsafe housing will continue to threaten our most vulnerable residents.

When you turn your attention to the city schools, there is much to report but also much coming soon. The city schools, eight months ago transitioned to the next phase of receivership with a new board, the Lawrence Alliance for Education, featuring a majority of local voices. Six months ago, following a nationwide search driven by extensive community input and engagement, we hired our first ever Latina Superintendent of Schools, Cynthia Paris. Since the new Lawrence Education Alliance (the new Receiver to the Public schools, is only 8 months old, what I can say is that the schools are maintaining the upward course set by the previous superintendent and receiver. The LAE Board and Superintendent have identified initial areas of focus, moving forward with concentrations on literacy intervention and math & science supports; social/emotional learning and special education programming, and professional development opportunities for teachers and staff, including curriculum and instruction and cultural competency. Know that we are doing this all, as we have in the past, with our city's elected School Committee.

We have also spent a lot of time, energy, resources and effort working on our school facilities. Millions of dollars have gone into and will go into projects large and small to make our students school experience a better one. Along with the design and development of two new schools at the Oliver and the Leahy Schools, we have worked on air conditioning at the Arlington and South Lawrence East Schools, as well as new furnaces and boilers in many schools, new roofs, new carpeting, painting and sidewalks. We are putting as much care and attention to the content in the class room as to the condition of it. You and I will be able to say that in the last 5 years we have made the largest investment in upgrading our schools in a generation.

The state of our city's public infrastructure after years of neglect and lack of funds is also having a significant comeback. We have ensured that DPW is consistently staffed, and trained to provide the services that our citizens expect from us. With the help of the investment from free cash to the annual Clean Lawrence initiative of temporary workers, we have removed from alleyways and other areas of the city over 687 tons of trash and illegal dumping, used 565 gallons of paint for graffiti removal, used 282 tons of asphalt used to fill potholes, installed over 330 new street signs where none existed. With your support, we also removed 368 hazardous and nuisance trees, and have finally addressed the long problematic side walk problems throughout our city and in our neighborhoods with 15,780 square feet of sidewalk repaired, and 16,789 linear feet of crosswalk painted. Thanks to the Capital Improvement Plan and your support of these investments, we have new street sweepers, new trucks and new plows. All of this, and the millions of dollars invested in our water and sewer infrastructure, is the slow but necessary investment and work to ensure no fatal failures of our public infrastructure.

Together, we have done much to make our city stronger. Tonight on your agenda you can take immediate action to continue to make our city stronger, tonight you can take up the matter of the City attorney and elect Raquel Ruano as our next City attorney I am fully prepared to support you in this matter.

Tonight you have before you the request from the family and neighbors of Leonel Rondon; the young man who lost his life to the Columbia Gas disasters, to change his current street from Chestnut St. to Leonel Rondon Way. I urge you to do that tonight.

Council President, tonight this body can vote to join the many cities and towns who support the state fully funding our public schools by voting on a joint resolution to support the work of the Foundation Budget Review Commission.

Lastly, I want to let you know of two budget items that will be before you in the next few weeks. First, I was inspired deeply by a proposal made by our friend and colleague in local Government Michelle Wu of the Boston City Council. The idea that the easier we can make public transportation the more people will use it and the neediest amongst us will use it for school, work and making their lives better. She proposed making the MBTA busses and subways free, a much bigger proposal. In Lawrence, we have 3 bus routes- #34 that services Prospect Hill, #37 that services Beacon St. & Mount Vernon & the Industrial Park and the newest shuttle, #85 that is the downtown circular that runs through the North Common, Plains, and Arlington Neighborhoods before coming through Broadway and Essex St. All three routes start and end in the city of

Lawrence. My proposal, while more modest, will be to provide free public bus transit on these three lines hoping to get the same increase in riders and social uplifting effect.

I will also send you a proposal to spend \$1 Million to upgrade and fix the city's basketball courts to make the playing surfaces new, replace hoops, rims and net infrastructure, provide lighting and water fountains where possible. All in all, with this investment we can provide our neighborhood kids and families a 21st century outdoor active recreation experience.

In closing, I will say we have come a long way from the days when we were labeled the City of the Damned, when people were not cheering for our success or rooting against us, where the whispers everywhere were negative. Politicians, including our previous Governor, would not be photographed in our city and we ourselves did not believe in our own ability to change our path. Today, we stand with student athletes winning regional and state-wide championships, Miss Massachusetts is a daughter of Lawrence, people from across the commonwealth came to help us in our greatest hour of need and yes, even our United States Senator, Elizabeth Warren, a possible candidate for the highest office in the land, someone who could be President of the United States, comes this Saturday to make a crucial announcement about that decision, and Lawrence will be the foreground, the back drop, the back story on what will be the national and international news event of the day. I think we can all confidently say that state of the City of Lawrence is Strong. Thank you and god bless the City of Lawrence.