



Lawrence State of the City 2015 - Mayor Daniel Rivera

Councilors elected officials and fellow Lawrencians. I stand before you tonight a bit battle worn if not from the end of my first year in office definitely from shoveling snow and fighting a winter season that has, according to some news accounts, in just the last few weeks, between Jan. 27 and today, brought us multiple blizzards and - seven feet of precipitation— which damaged roofs, burst gutters, destroyed roads and sidewalks, closed schools and businesses, shut down highways, crippled public transit and trapped people in their homes.

The infamous Blizzard of 1978 brought around 27 inches of snow and shut down the region for a week. In less than a month, we've seen more than three times as much snow. The temperature has hovered between 5 and 25 degrees, so none of the snow and ice has melted yet. A winter of historical proportion that has had the Governor & most major Cities of the Commonwealth calling for help from the National Guard and getting equipment from surrounding less effected states. I would like to take this opportunity to recognize John Isensee and his staff for all the hard work they have done through these trying times. It has not been easy and all things considered they have done it effectively and with professionalism. With all our snow removal obstacles, we are fortunate to have a community that has both supported our efforts in snow removal and has the stamina to withstand these harsh winter conditions. Having survived this alone makes us a strong community.

So tonight I hope to provide to you a state of the City address that not only explains the accomplishments of our administration, but that shows a City turning the corner in a new direction, one of professionalism, transparency, and results driven governing; A City on the road to gaining credibility and trust with our voters and community members, and our state and federal partners.

Before you, you have a presentation with much more department by department detailed accomplishments; I will try to give you the highlights as I see it. What we will see and hear tonight is that to move forward is not enough. We must be moving in the right, positive, direction and I believe that our first year will show that we are moving not just forward, but more importantly in the right direction. I will spare you the laundry list of problems we found here in the City of Lawrence when we took over last year, because many of those things have been discussed at length & frankly those problems are mine to fix now. I will say that we (you & I) have had much to do to get the government running back at 100%. The Good news is that we are well on our way and that the State of our City is strong, but ... with much to do to insure long term strength.

First I wanted to let you know that for the first time in more than 28 years, Lawrence has a “A” level credit rating from both major credit agencies. An accomplishment that signals that we are on the right track, while our administration and the previous one played a role in achieving this goal, I Specifically want to recognize our Budget and Finance Director Mark Ianello, and former Fiscal Overseer Bob Nunes, who provided valuable guidance and leadership to the City in achieving this goal. I also want to thank the current & past City Council for working hard to pass budgets and set tax rates on time, and for making sure budgets were balanced. We hope to work with you this summer to make it 6 balanced budgets passed on time. But our financial health is a lot like the rest our City’s strength, it is a fragile condition. Any wrong financial move, and prolonged debate, or inaction on matters of financial importance can send our City back into a place of bad footing. I want to thank you personally for doing all that you do. I am hopeful that this council and I can continue to work together to ensure our City's financial health.

So what have we done in the last year? Just to keep on the financial theme it must be stated that we (you and I) past a budget with no new taxes - for the first time in 12 years. We also received \$1 million dollars in grants to continue to fight crime in our neighborhoods. Our newly re-organized Office of planning and development headed by Theresa Parks applied for \$13.8 Million in funding for different development projects in our City and we were awarded \$12.1 million of that. That includes the \$2 Million dollars committed by the EPA to begin to clean up the Merrimack Paper site. That is an 88% success rate by Theresa & her team. Permits from the Inspectional services dept. went up 15% representing more than \$51 Million dollars in construction. Also because of continued conservative financial management, our spending freeze, and our 5% cut to non public safety budgets, we were able to grow our free cash number to \$9.5 million dollars. Even with the new loans for public safety you just authorized (thank you for that again by the way) even with those new loans, we still reduced our long term debt by \$12 Million dollars last year. Factoring in that property values across the commonwealth went up ours were no different, Lawrence property values increased by \$56.4 Million dollars, but more importantly our new growth went up by \$1.6 Million. I know these are a lot of numbers, but this is a snap shot of our current financial situation which shows much to be proud of, and encouragement to continue the financial practices of the last years. Because of this and because of the record snow fall which will mean a record hit to our snow & Ices budget, starting March 1st I will again be instituting a spending freeze. This will ensure that we have to use less of our free cash money to close out the fiscal year. I again want to be conservative in spending.

So what have we done in the past year to make Lawrence better for our people? We must start where we said we would focus public safety. Even with out having the full impact of the 10 new police officers because of training and timing there was a modest drop of 4.2% in crime overall. I will admit that we want a greater impact, and that we did suffer too many homicides this past

year but, I can stand here and report that all but 1 of the homicides from last year has been closed or are in the process of being closed. This number drop in crime while small is the beginning of a greater impact we hope to have in the coming years. With your support, last year we moved officers from administrative roles in the Police department to patrol the streets. We started walking patrols on Broadway to deal with the crime in that area, went into neighborhoods with police outreach and visibility efforts that ended with at least one long standing after hour party house being condemned and shut down. Two of the things I am most proud of in the Police Department besides the drop in crime are our efforts to diversify the police dept's personnel and the work of creating a more clearly civilian complaint process.

Today there are more female officers and officers of color on the Lawrence Police Department or in training to become police officers in Lawrence. Then the day that I started, this is something that Council president Maldonado and I have discussed at length as a priority. We will continue to focus on hiring the best police we can get with attention to insuring that the force better reflects the community it serves. We are also in negotiations with the Human Resources Division of the Commonwealth to amend or waive the consent degree for hiring police officers as it currently does not help us in achieving the right balance of recruits. The second most important effort is that today, if you want to file a complaint (in English or Spanish) it is clear on how to do so and it is clear for everyone in the department what will happen if every complaint with merit is not taken seriously, something I and Councilor Vasquez agreed needed serious attention, and I have promised him that we will continue to focus on it. The Police department today is more effective, more diverse, and more accountable. Today for the first time we do monthly reviews of 911 calls and rate them for quality and customer service, these reviews are something that Councilor Almonte wanted us to focus on. So today both police officers and call takers are being held accountable for the way they treat people when they call or do business at the Police dept.

We have focused some considerable time making the function of government in Lawrence more professional, increasing the perception that Lawrence means business. These efforts are not just neck ties and parking spots. This effort is making sure that when everyone is faced with emergencies that City Hall is open and working. It means that departments communicate with each other to troubleshoot and solve problems. We have accomplished this with weekly & Monthly department head meetings, with focused finance team meetings, and as the need arises taskforce meetings to insure issues of pressing matters are addressed quickly, thoroughly, and across all departments. We insured that inspectors and workers in departments are treating people with dignity and respect. Something as small as making sure that the waiting area in Inspectional Services was sufficient and comfortable for customers, making departments clean out their offices of unneeded paper and clutter, painting some offices, and moving others has

made City hall more professional. If you have not been to the Elections office and have not seen how clean and organized that office is, you must go tomorrow. You will be amazed how a tidy well organized office can begin to instill confidence in a government office.

These are just small examples of our efforts to make the work of government more professional. We must continue to insure that the tax payers in Lawrence & the commonwealth both know that when we spend their money it is being used for the greatest impact, that when we manage our staff that they are being managed to the contract and that the staff is providing the best and most productive service while they are on the clock, and if the staff fails to provide the best service, that they will be disciplined and fired if need be. It's what you expect, it's what I expect and it is what tax payers expect.

Some of the other ways we have worked to make Lawrence better for its residents can be seen by the 11,000 rides taken on the new downtown shuttle that we implemented in June. Our community today is better off with 77 lead free housing units created, 21 new homeowners helped with down payment assistance, and the 7 distressed properties that were brought back to use. It is important to note that we have gone after problem properties with a more focused and energized effort. These problem properties are something that I know Councilor Bernal has reminded me as important to get back on the Tax rolls. You know these properties (empty lots full of trash, burned homes partly demolished) properties that for generations have been neglected by their owners and by the City of Lawrence. No more! Today we have two sets of people: one going after tax tile properties, another going after court receivership type properties. We will do the best we can to rid the City of these distressed properties.

We also started work on at least three parks across the City (The Ferrious site, the point spray park, & the park at Union & Canal St.). This past year the City's DPW Dept. filled close to 8,200 potholes and put up 604 signs, painted much needed cross walks and street lines, fixed erupted sidewalks and increased recycling. Unlike past years this year we used our chapter 90 money for these things and were still able to re-pave 31 of the worse City streets.

Something that has been near and dear to Councilor Twomey has been the water infrastructure. The water department rehab'd 18,700 feet of water mains, inspected, and cleaned 91,500 ft of sewer mains. All this will provide our tax payers & residents a better public infrastructure, and firefighters the much needed water pressure they have been deprived of in fighting fires.

I must again thank you for your help in funding the Clean Lawrence initiative this summer, together we hired 25 temporary workers to help clean our City streets, a special thanks to councilor Reyes who encouraged us to put in an education function, so an education flyer was produced and dropped in each neighborhood the team cleaned. I would also like to mention the work we did to bring light to our downtown. Councilor Aquino brought to my attention a

problem that we had on our to do list and with her and other councilor's encouragement we fast tracked the purchasing of 138 new LED lights for our downtown. So for the first time in i'm not sure how long, Essex Street and surrounding streets are both bright and welcoming. This is just a start. We also began to look at traffic patterns and with small changes made commuting a better experience for thousands of our residents, something that was of particular importance to Councilor Laplante and the Colonial Heights neighborhood. This is the type of cooperation that the members of our community want, the type that brings concrete results.

In an effort to improve the readiness of our workforce, which is really the workforce for the Merrimack Valley, we increased the total seats of ESL classes for adults. Helping people also included 65,000 units of service provided by the senior center, by the way we finally put in a new AC in the dominoes room at the senior center a much needed and over due enhancement. Along those same lines you should know that 2,000 Veterans and their families visited our Veterans Office looking for services. As you can see we have been quite busy.

We have focused on enforcing some of the most annoying of the violations of ordinances we see City-wide, people's quality of life was improved by the 406 criminal complaints issued from the surveillance dumping cameras, the enforcement of the noise ordinance this summer, and yes even the enforcement of the parking ban. For every one person affected by this enforcement we make life better and easier for at least 20 other families. The re-staffing of the Licensing Commission, to create one that is active and fair but stern, has had huge return for control and oversight of Liquor selling establishments in our City. Under Chairman Pedro Torres's leadership the Commission has made over 2 inspections for each license. That is over 160 inspections since his appointment. Our overall quality of life has improved with a full compliment of commission and board members. Last year I promised to send these City Council competent, dedicated, members of our community for consideration to our boards and commissions. We sent you 46 and thank you for confirming them all. I also said we will make sure we provide them all the information and training they need to do the best work possible. These trainings are something that City Councilor Alvarez-Rodriguez wanted to be sure we conducted. So I am here to report most of the new board members and their respective commissions have received training in their respective areas of responsibility. Also after the extensive discussion about corruption in Lawrence we made sure that we gave every Department head ethics training from the state.

About our schools.

What can I say about our schools that the former governor, the new governor, the secretary of education at the Federal and state levels, along with the National teacher's union, and almost every review of the progress in our schools has already said? 6 level 1 schools and more are

coming. Graduation rates are up and drop out rates are down. MCAS scores are getting better and better when compared to our peer gateway cities. The high school is being re-imagined with a 9th grade academy and the Abbott Lawrence academy an exam like school and they are moving to a single bell schedule and a more unified high school model. Things are looking up all around. I look forward to continuing to support Superintendent Riley and his staff in making our schools effective and successful. You should know we have had steady growth in enrollment over the last 3 years - so we will have to have some conversations in 2015 about new space for the growing student population. Also we have completed moving the School department from under a financially oppressive lease. Currently they are at the old high school and we are on a path where we will be looking for a property to purchase and move them into in the near future. Other than that the schools continue their progress at a remarkable pace with little to be concerned about.

The last thing that I will mention is something that is hard to measure. This is a thing that is very fragile and if not tended to effectively and regularly can be more damaging than 20 blizzards, and multiple crime waves, and that is Lawrence's reputation. With your help, in a short 12 months we have been able to start to change how we feel about ourselves, how our neighbors feel about us, and how our State and Federal leaders feel about us. We have had countless positive news articles in our local daily and weekly papers; we have had over 32 positive stories in the Boston print media not to mention the numerous positive television stories about the progress we are making here. The people of Lawrence have begun to also believe that we can be, and that if we continue to work hard together, we will be a better Lawrence. State leaders now think of Lawrence as a place to showcase their agendas and their programs. Former Governor Patrick & Current Governor Baker, Senate President Rosenberg and Speaker DeLeo, US Senators Elizabeth Warren & Ed Markey, and our very own congresswoman Niki Tsongas all are anxious to help us overcome our problems. Our neighboring communities are partnering with us on transportation, economic development and fighting crime. Today People are talking about Lawrence. From Boston to Washington, from Andover to Haverhill, Lowell to Newburyport people are talking about Lawrence. Not in those hushed shameful, negative tones from the past, no, today when they talk about Lawrence they are talking about how something good is happening in Lawrence, and how possibilities abound in Lawrence. I don't want you to think that for minute that I am taking credit for all of that, what we did in this one small year was get out of the way and support all the great things that have been happening in our city for years, and then we opened up the door and welcomed people in to see for themselves. For all the above and for all the work of this City Council, our School Committee, our state representatives & senator, and of course the hard work of the people of Lawrence the hope we had a year ago today has materialized in a list of accomplishments we can all be proud of, a list of accomplishments that will let others begin to see that the state of our City is strong and that we

this council and I and our school committee and everyone that has a role to play will insure it remains strong for many years to come. Thank you. God bless us and god bless the City of Lawrence. Thank you.