



Mayor Daniel Rivera – 2017 State of the City

Council President Vasquez, City Councilors, elected officials and fellow Lawrencians. Tonight I intend to report to you on the state of our City. Although with a victory like the Patriots had in Sunday night's Super Bowl, I am not sure we have everyone's un-divided attention. But we will do our best to report on our City's progress. I feel it is important to begin by framing where we are today with where we were 4 years ago.

4 years ago the government of this City had no moral compass, and no focus. It was mired in multiple political, personal and criminal scandals, and was intent on settling petty squabbles instead of truly "Moving Lawrence Forward". We had a police department that was demoralized, divided, and decimated to a fraction of the size appropriate for our City. We had a fire department that had transient leadership and was under manned, with firefighters living in fire houses that were in poor conditions. The business community had no trust or confidence in municipal government. Most residents felt that their basic needs were not being met. There had been little economic development news in many years. No one trusted City hall to get anything right.

The staff, with some exceptions, at the highest and amongst the most crucial levels was either vacant or did not have the capacity to manage the complex workings of a \$240 million dollar municipality. The City had just lost control of our schools and the extent of success of the district's turnaround plan was yet unclear. We had a cemetery that was a regional embarrassment where not even the grass would be cut on a regular basis. Our local library that had continually lower and lower usage and the community did not see it as an asset nor a community center. Business and property owners would go without paying their taxes for years and would continue to reap benefits. Boards and commissions were under staffed and without training. In the summers, trash, dirt and weeds would go un-cleaned and unkempt across the City.

Places like the Showcase Cinema, the Diadimo Building, the Merrimack Paper site, the Ferrous site, Tomberello site, the Kane Gym site and the Point in the North Common neighborhood were properties that either brought problems to this city, or were symptoms of the blight across our City. The abandoned rail bed that stretched across North Lawrence was just that, abandoned and blighted with no prospect for improvement. At the State and Federal level leaders from the Governor to the heads of federal agencies wanted nothing to do with Lawrence. Unfortunately, that meant that the amount of State & Federal dollars were few and far between, despite the best efforts of our State & Federal delegations at the time.

The pride and morale of people in our City was low. Their property values were through the floor and Mayor Lantigua and mayors going back at least 10 years had raised taxes to the levy every year with no regard for its impact to taxpayers and businesses. Capital improvements to our city buildings, schools, and parks were nonexistent. The Message from the Mayor's office 4 years ago was pay more taxes, and deal with the dysfunction of City government. We were left a mess.

So where do we stand a short four years later? I am happy to report that while we have not cured Lawrence of all its ills and problems, you and I, with the help of Congresswomen Tsongas, Senator L'Italien, Representatives Moran, DiZoglio, and former Rep. Devers, (I am excited to start a new chapter

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with our New State Rep Juana Matias in helping Lawrence) and US Senators Markey and Warren, and even Governor Charlie Baker; we have all worked hard to make Lawrence better.

Since becoming Mayor, we have avoided the scandals that plagued the previous administration. And when we have been wrong or have made miss steps, we admitted our problems and have been open and honest on how we have fixed them. We have given all department heads ethics training and training on procurement and purchasing. We have made professionalism and customer services our mission at City Hall. It's not perfect yet but we have made it better. Our intention is to give customer service training to every employee in the City in the coming year to further improve tax payers' experience in City Hall.

I pledged that my administration would rebuild our public safety departments and we have done just that. In the Police department, this is the 3rd year in a row that we have had a drop in crime. This is the 2nd year with a double digit drop. This year the crime rate in Lawrence is down 13.1% from the last year. This year we have had the lowest Residential Burglaries and lowest Commercial burglaries rates since before 1999. Chief Fitzpatrick and the men and women of the department are doing the best job they can under the circumstances.

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, the increase in the opioid drug trade, and our inability to ramp up the size of our police department to meet the demand. We have added officers every year, most recently we graduated 6 fully bilingual police officers and are sending another 12 to the police academies in February and March. That will put us up 23 net new police officers in the past 3 years. This is the most ethnically and gender diverse police hiring effort in the department's history. This is worth repeating. This is the most ethnically and gender diverse police hiring effort in the department's history. It should help bridge the gap between the police and the community. This hiring effort will still be 20 police officers short of the high, back when John Romero was chief and crime rate was the lowest. We will keep at it, but we know that we will not have won the fight on crime until people in Lawrence feel safe.

We also know that we have much to do to bring the community and the Police closer together. To that end, I will be sending to you for appropriation and passage a proposal to fund a Director level Community Police Liaison and a coordinator to support the Chief and I in our efforts in Community Policing. These two positions will focus the department on community interactions and customer service, missing and exploited children, and domestic violence.

While Grants continue to support our fire department hiring we have gotten staffing to a stable place. In listening to the Concerns about overtime by Councilor Modesto Maldonado, this year we are at a point where overtime spending is so low that for the first time in 3 years the Fire Chief has not had to come before you for additional money for overtime. Under Chief Moriarty and after the lobbying and support of Councilor Marc Laplante, we have opened the Bailey Street fire station. While the Ames Street station does not have an active company in there yet, the Department's Fire prevention unit has made it a home and it is no longer vacant and abandoned. We as a City have also invested millions of dollars in

improving the firefighters living conditions, fixing roofs, boilers and painting, and have upgraded the fleet with 3 new fire trucks.

We had some pretty exciting economic development news this past year. First a site that had been closed and awaiting redevelopment for many years The Showcase Cinema 1-6 site on 114 last month was sold to the owners of Bulger Veterinary Hospital and they will build a state of the art animal hospital along with some medical office/retail space. We think maybe even a Starbucks. Now that development is a win not just because it is being developed, but because Lawrence finally took a stand that a higher and better use was demanded and expected for such a premiere site. We said no to gas stations, to Goodwill stores, to UHaul storage sites and all types of low end uses. These developers said, “Mayor take what you can get.” We said no. We stood firm and ended up getting a development and an end use that will build a great business and improve the Lawrence brand. Similarly, the long abandoned Tombarello Salvage yard, that is close to the hearts of Councilors Nilka Alvarez Rodriguez and Myra Ortiz, off of 495, for the first time is owned by the City and making it a clean, developable site is no longer a dream. We can say today that the 14 acre site off of 495, with neighborhood input, could be clean and ready within 2 years for development.

We are putting housing downtown where blight and red “X”s on buildings used to keep people out. Even the storied Valley Lodging Motel on Common St. is no longer a flop house but 21 units of housing for Lawrence families. As soon as 6 months from now and growing every month though 2019 the City will see a increase of close to 1,000 housing units with a mix of affordable and market rate, most of which will be downtown. Combating the City’s growing housing and rental crisis.

Along those lines, we have had \$200 million in private investments in our City in the last 3 years, which is \$10 million more than the previous 8 years combined. Theresa Park who joined our team in the Spring of 2014 is the first professional planner to head that department for the City in many years. She and her department have brought in close to \$27 million dollars from the State and Federal Government for infrastructure and community development activities. This does not include the over \$500,000 leant to small businesses in Lawrence as part of the Venture Loan Fund that we secured in lock step with the Lawrence Partnership. This has also meant that we were able to give Small Business grants of \$3,500 to immigrant entrepreneurs to improve small business interiors, \$1.2 Million to upgrade the busiest intersection at Park and Lawrence Streets. It also meant the public private partnership at Lafruteria Market where our \$500,000 will be part of the funds to transform the parking lot and the adjacent open space. Supporting an anchor in one of the state’s poorest census tract.

The Diadimo Building where we were paying \$380,000 just in rent in addition to taxes, utilities and maintenance costs is now our City Hall Annex which is today the home of 53 employees of the Workforce Investment Board and Valleyworks Career Center. They will be paying rent which at its height will be \$224,000 a year, and also that project will come in \$1 million dollars under budget. The Merrimack Paper site has been cleaned up to the tune of \$1.2 million, and with the help of the Attorney General’s office the owners are being brought to justice for the delinquency. The Ferrous site is now a beautiful outdoor trail and park with an open gazebo that last summer hosted the 2nd Annual Lawrence Jazz Festival. The old Kane Gym site was where mounds of dirt and City snow overflow was kept; today

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it is the site of a modern soccer field and outdoor workout area. The Point, the site of the old St. Lawrence O'Toole church, today is a summer jewel. A spray park stands where for many years an empty formless lot once was. This has served to add to the transformation of that neighborhood. Finally, the abandoned Manchester Lawrence rail bed today has a bright future. Our Cemetery, thanks to Greg Morris and the Board of Trustees, for the first time in years is a place of pride and at the very least we are living up to the responsibility that we have to those buried there and their families. Our library is becoming the cultural center and icon our City needs and deserves. Thanks to Jessica Valentine, the Board of Trustees and the staff, the community is finding a home in our library.

Today not only do we have a fully qualified Director of Public Works, but we also have a Streets & Parks supervisor and a building and facilities director that are of the highest caliber and experience. To continue in that theme of insuring that we have qualified people in important roles, I will send you a candidate for City Engineer that has her PE, a Master's Degree in Engineering and is a resident of our City. Again having the top 4 positions at DPW filled with good people will make a difference in our quality of life. I would like to thank Councilor Jeovanny Rodriguez in this effort both in the hiring of our DPW director and for helping us recruit qualified workers. I know that we can be doing better with trash clean up. That is why we will continue our annual "Clean Lawrence" effort of hiring 25 ninety day laborers to clean and beautify our City streets this summer. But to finally attack the scourge of graffiti in our City, we will take that model and hire another 25 ninety day laborers to go property to property across the City and paint over or remove graffiti. I will also work with Council President Vasquez and the rest of the Council to establish a significant increase in graffiti fines in order to fund more removal and a financial reward program for residents who assist in finding people doing the graffiti in our City. This will make a significant dent in the problem.

On the education front: Thanks to Parents, teachers, students, the Lawrence Teachers Union, Superintendent and his staff Today, Lawrence schools are in a very different place then they were a short 4 years ago. Test scores are at all-time high in proficiency rates for math, English and science, with the state's calculations showing Lawrence has passed more than 40 other school districts. Today ½ of the schools in the district are either level 1 or level 2. The dropout rate has been cut in half and more students than ever are getting their diplomas. The graduation rate has jumped nearly 20 percentage points. One of the things that I think is part of the secret to Superintendent Riley's success is the investment in arts, sports and enrichment. Opportunities in those areas have expanded dramatically, especially through partnerships with area organizations like the YMCA and the Boys & Girls Club. All that and a longer school day and year for most kids. Today kids are learning in Lawrence like never before. And for the first time in a long time we are planning for the building of a new Oliver School, and will be putting new boilers in the Leahy and Bruce schools. We will also have new boilers in the old high school and we will only pay \$300,000 of the \$1.5 million project, thanks to the MSBA. Our first application to that fund since building of the Guilmette School.

During my short 3 years we have collected more money from tax delinquents than the previous 9 years combined. Meanwhile, we were able to squirrel away \$12 million dollar in free cash reserves even after paying \$3 million to fight record blizzards 2 years ago, resurfacing 22 new baseball fields including, Thanks to Councilor David Abdo new turf on the baseball fields and new dug outs at Mt Vernon Park,

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and the thanks to Councilor Estella Reyes new turf on the baseball fields and new dug outs at Hayden Schofield Playstead. We outfitted police officers with new cruisers and firefighters with new trucks and conducted much overdue maintenance in our public schools. This has made Wall Street happy because we have had 2 bond rating increases since I became mayor. I know that taxes have been a concern of Councilor Brian DePena, you can sleep well knowing that we've made Lawrence more financially stable and we still kept Lawrence as the 2nd lowest average tax bill in the Commonwealth, according to the Department of Revenue. Our administration has kept taxes lower than any administration in the last 12 years.

We too are riding the regional and national growing economy with Lawrence's unemployment rate at 4.9% the lowest it's been in almost 17 years. Things are looking positive. And the business climate in Lawrence is great. Asahi America Occupying a 200,000 sqft building where Staples once was. Haffners bought out by Energy north and then consolidating their HQ from Tewksbury to Lawrence Investing \$3M in facility remodel, and bringing 40 new employees. And New Balance invested \$8 million in Lawrence in the last 3 years.

Many things have transpired in Washington in the last month and we have a new president. I wanted to make sure to take a second and remind and reassure everyone that Lawrence is an immigrant city and we intend to protect all of the immigrant families in our community. Any Lawrence family who feels threatened or scared or vulnerable, I want you to know that you are safe in Lawrence. The Chief of police and I are working to uphold both the ordinances of the City and the Laws of our nation. Despite what is happening 455 miles away we have to live with and amongst each other and we have to control our own destiny.

As I look to what faces our city in the coming year I will be telling everyone that will listen that... you will read on the front page above the fold of most newspapers, you will see on tv on the evening news and read at the top of your Facebook feeds about the many problems we face in Lawrence every day. We have had, and we will continue to have problems in Lawrence, that's not the point. The larger point is how we manage the day to day crisis of a midsized, aging industrial City trying to rebuild itself. When someone we rent our football field to destroys it, we don't just say well its Lawrence, what do you expect? No, we fix it and we make it better than we found it.

I don't want you to think for one minute that I am taking credit for all that we have done in these last years. This is the work of our staff, department heads, our state & federal elected officials and our community as a whole. Again I am happy to report that while we have not cured Lawrence of all its ills and problems, you and we have all worked to make Lawrence better.

This work of running our municipal government is hard work, hard but important work. It won't always be pretty, we will have a crazy personnel matter or two, we will have tragedies, but we will have victories and we will continue to make Lawrence better every day. Just know that now for the first time in a long time serious people are running the City and we are focused on making Lawrence better. So for all of these reasons and because of our strong families and strong churches our strong non-profits, and strong businesses the State of our City is Strong! Thank you.