



City of Methuen, Massachusetts

OFFICE OF THE MAYOR

The Searles Building, 41 Pleasant Street, Suite 306
Methuen, Massachusetts 01844
Telephone: 978-983-8505

Neil Perry
Mayor

State of The City Address

26 January 2021

Good Evening my fellow Methuen residents. I hope this finds you all safe and healthy. Although it doesn't seem possible, it has been one full year since I took office and tonight, I'm taking the opportunity to address you, and provide my candid assessment on what we have been able to accomplish in these past 12 months, the challenges we've faced together, the challenges still in front of us, and my goals on how to address them and how we can continue to move forward. This will be, I believe a frank discussion, focused on the things I've done that have worked out well, and some that have not – and what I've learned from them. The format for tonight is somewhat different, so while we will not be taking questions during the address itself, I strongly encourage you to ask any questions during tomorrow's edition of Mayor's Minutes. As always, my goal, as it has been since I took office is to be as transparent as possible, and I welcome your feedback and questions. Additionally, we will provide access to a copy on our City website immediately upon completion of the address.

I want to begin tonight by reflecting on the year past, an historic year, one that we experienced together. As I entered office in January of 2020, our community was in turmoil, with a crisis of public trust existing. Much like a builder constructing a house, I immediately began by establishing a foundation – a foundation based upon trust, candor, and openness to restore the public confidence in our city government. We began working as a team to set expectations and create realistic and achievable goals. We developed a plan to conservatively address budgetary and legal issues facing the City and made some initial progress – including updating our Continuity of Operations plan – little knowing that we would need to use it so soon.

By the beginning of March, the COVID pandemic begins. While it's not clear initially the severity of the issue, our life devolves into a daily coordination of all activities across the city. Every day brought changing information, and the need to coordinate that information across city departments and share that information with our citizens. Many operational decisions were made, including daily Zoom calls with department heads, establishment of communication channels and metrics and school updates for all in our community, and thus, Mayor's Minutes

was born, originally as a daily show to address the dynamically changing information. Tactical examples such as shift changes were discussed, reviewed, and implemented for Methuen Police, Fire and DPW to combat the effects of the virus on first responders, and remote work capabilities were implemented.

But some of the decisions made at this time were of lasting significance.

- In the early days, with the help from the school nursing population and nursing volunteers from the community, we established a **contact tracing capability** long before the state provided it.
- We provided metrics (daily for the first 3 months and then twice weekly) to ensure maximum flow of information to residents; we amped up our social media communication and eventually published a monthly newsletter to share information as many ways as possible and to leave no one out.
- Our schools staff worked tirelessly to establish an immediate remote capability in the spring, and then when it became clear that the pandemic would not simply be gone by the start of the new school year, developed a plan, which they continue to dynamically adjust – with a superior technology for remote participation. It hasn't been easy, as the decisions to go remote or not are part of every week meeting between the BOH, The Superintendent, the Lead School Nurse and myself- and to be sure, regardless the decision, we've understood the frustration – but we have made the decisions in the best interests of safety for all considered (Staff, students, admin etc.)
- We established the Methuen CARES Center, initially simply a neighbor helping neighbor effort – to check on seniors, quarantined individuals and others who were simply housebound. And Methuen responded in a huge way with donations. Eventually we were able to secure some federal funding to aid, but in these early days, the community truly pulled together to help one another. Methuen Cares continues to this day, and continues to receive much needed donations to help fund the efforts (as federal funding is no longer available) – so if you're in need or you know a family in need, please reach out to them. And, if you are doing well, consider a donation to help your fellow Methuenites. I've often said during Mayor's Minutes broadcasts that you can tell the character of a community during trying times, and the community response to helping each other through Methuen Cares is something I'll never forget.
- And we opened "Stop the spread" testing sites, in partnership with the State, in two locations across the city, and when we identified that wouldn't be enough, we used Federal Funding to contract testing for our students, our staff, our city workers and our community and ran six separate testing events at Methuen High School.

While all this was still ongoing, we suffered a cyber attack of the city's infrastructure in July. Long obsolete software and hardware made this attack truly concerning as it was a ransomware attack from an Eastern European nation. Critical information for the City, for you the residents and for our partners could have been exposed, but our IT service providers detected the attack, were able to prevent significant harm. In partnership with City Council, we recognized the danger, spent carefully and updated hardware and software – including a forensic audit that confirmed the original diagnosis of a ransomware attack. We upgraded the infrastructure and facilitated the ability for some workers to work remotely while still maintaining essential core functions for residents throughout the city

At the same time, in partnership with our state delegates, and using as a base an earmark from DESE that State Rep. Linda Dean Campbell secured for us, our Community Development team in partnership with City Council, and under Bill Buckley's direction, led an effort to obtain additional funding sources and completely re-constructed the outdoor track at Nicholson Stadium- which was completed on time, on schedule and on budget. This provides an outdoor track facility that has not been available for over 5 years, and provides a necessary recreation facility for all our residents.

We also welcomed a brand new, state of the art facility for Dana Farber to Methuen on Branch Street.

I followed through on my campaign promise to focus on transparency and completed several key efforts to ensure every citizen is informed in a number of ways:

- I initiated an RFP for and contracted, with city council's approval, with CNA to conduct an audit of the Methuen Police Department. That audit was handled professionally, and the recently completed audit with its 23 recommendations provide a strong foundation for actions to improve our department (More on that in our goals for 2021).
- I initiated legislation to remove the use of full-time intermittent police officers in Methuen;
- We have added a Financial Transparency Center to the city website for all residents, where you can access CLEARGOV, which allows for graphical review of revenues and expenditures as well as comparison capability fiscal year to fiscal year; and
- We implemented SECLICKFIX, a problem reporting and tracking platform, first for COVID, and recently updated for snow removal and trash related issues to allow residents to report on line and track actions through to completion. This feature will be expanded again in 2021 so any and all DPW transactions can be requested via the platform and provides increased accountability to all citizens.

On the financial front, we were able to achieve a number of key initiatives;

- We established a conservative fiscal oversight process with monthly department reviews – which enabled us to end FY20 by adding almost \$3M to our Free Cash bottom line;
- We improved our financial outlook from Moody's from Negative to Stable;
- We partnered with City Council to pass a conservative budget for FY'21 with an overall decrease in almost all department planned expenditures; and
- Again in partnership with City Council, I drove a process to hold almost \$1m in excess capacity – this reducing the impact upon residents and lowering the tax rate for both residents and businesses and resulting in the lowest tax increase in over ten years.
- I also implemented a new take-home vehicle policy, drastically reducing the number of vehicles being driven home as a focus on financial accountability.

And with the assistance of Federal and State Coronavirus funding we were able to:

- Complete long overdue heating system upgrades at City Hall;
- Establish a customer service center in the main tunnel at City Hall with significant tunnel upgrades and security features;
- Procure and install air purification units at city sites, including the VFW, the American Legion and MCTV;
- Provide PPE for first responders and city workers, including spray guns for disinfecting
- Pay for COVID Education Officers and Mask Up Methuen campaign;
- Plan and conduct Safe Community Events such as the alternative Trick or Treat Drive through;
- Provide a Rental Assistance Program;
- Return Restaurant Licensing fees based upon the impact of the pandemic;
- Provide Health and safety updates to our senior center including new flooring; and
- Also provide Health and safety updates to the Nevin's library;
- Engaged with bilingual radio and newsletters aimed at increasing the flow of information and the connection to our Hispanic community;
- And provided additional staffing to support the changes in voting, especially the mail-in and early voting capabilities.

On the community front, we were able to engage in multiple dialogues regarding diversity and equity in our city, and as a result established an advisory panel – Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Advisory Group to provide the administration with key focus areas of improvement; and we transitioned a number of leaders in the city, including hiring four (4) new department heads in the past year (Treasurer, Human Resources, DPW and Veterans Service Officer).

While it may seem like we have accomplished a great deal, we have yet a long way to go, and in my view – have to consolidate and build upon these initial improvements. There have been

failures too, such as the Holiday Light Tour, a great idea – for which the time was right to lift the spirits – failed in execution. The lesson not lost, is to measure twice, cut once. In our rush to provide something beneficial, we did not do our due diligence – and that’s on me. I plan to do something much better in 2021.

But in building upon our initial improvements, we must strive to ensure the inclusion of every voice. And it is upon that we have developed a document that outlines our goals for 2021, including some which COVID kept us from achieving in 2020. Though some are tactical and others strategic in nature, examples of the focused goals include but are not limited to:

- Communicating and Establishing a COVID Vaccination Site for all Methuen residents; and maximizing the speed and availability to all Methuen residents desiring vaccination;
- Building upon communication methodologies begun in 2020; Designing and implementing a comprehensive city web site as part of an overall communication strategy;
- Facilitating the creation of active neighborhood organizations throughout the city (includes the COVID delayed cameras program);
- Build upon our focus “War on Trash” to develop a sustaining Keep Methuen Clean program; and identifying the best trash and recycling programs for Methuen
 - Develop a “Go Green” Program
 - Solar Panels, Electric Vehicles, etc.
- Supporting additional artistic and cultural initiatives in the city (ex Light the Falls);
- Continue to increase transparency and trust in local government through open communication. Objective audits and detailed follow up plans;
 - MPD Plan to address the 23 recommendations from the completed CNA Audit;
 - Engage and gain council support to conduct a DPW audit;
 - Implement at least three (3) recommendations from the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Advisory Group
- Build upon financial gains observed in Year 1; develop a plan to get Methuen on track to recommended state levels of Free Cash and Stabilization;
 - Implement Conservative fiscal plan to ensure “no surprises” from state revenues
 - Develop a Budget and Revenue Task Force
 - Develop and gain council endorsement on a 1, 3 and 5 year Capital Improvement Plan;
 - Successfully negotiate all collective bargaining agreements
- Engage with local business and develop a city / business consortium
 - Attract key developers, market Methuen’s viability
- Finalize Methuen’s Open Space Plan
 - Create a Planning committee for Tricentennial
 - Create a parks and Improvement timetable and plan in alignment with Open Spaces Plan

- Begin the Implementation of MUNIS as financial and HR record keeping system across all city departments
- Centralize HR record keeping and processes across all departments
 - Standardize training for city employees and leaders
 - Establish Policies and Procedures reflective of the resident's values and Code of Conduct
 - Complete Sexual Harassment and Conflict of Interest Annual Trainings
 - Engage all City Department Heads and Interviewers in Unconscious Bias Training
- Bring the City of Methuen into compliance with all Federal EPA Stormwater regulations;
- Maximize the application for and participation in available grant programs at the state and federal level
- Establish a 20th Anniversary Committee for 9/11 to ensure a significant remembrance.

These are but examples. And while the pandemic rages on, there is, for the first time, light at the end of the tunnel. Vaccines are coming. First responders received them last week, and in February additional members of the population will be eligible to receive them. Methuen WILL set up a COVID vaccination site in an effort to get as many vaccines distributed to all our residents who want them and that provides optimism for the rest of 2021. But I would be remiss if I didn't remind all of the need to mask up, stay socially distant, and wash your hands thoroughly – even after you receive the vaccine. Now is NOT the time to waiver in our resolve.

Overall, the health of our city is improving. But, in parallel to our situation with the pandemic, we must take great care to ensure that the modest gains we have made in year one, aren't merely temporary improvements. We need to continue our fiscally conservative approach to ensure the overall good standing of our community and even more importantly, we need to continue to take the necessary steps to engender trust from our community in all that we say and do. This is paramount to Methuen's future; safeguarding the accountability that every citizen demands and deserves.

Your local government will continue to make decisions solely in the best interests of the City of Methuen. I pledge to work as many hours as needed, to give what it takes, to help guide us ahead. I love this city and frankly, I love working for you. But, I need your help. For too long, we have been focused on the drama, fueled by social media claims – half-truths, rumors and innuendos, there remains far too much negative information spread about this city, my city, your city. It's time to turn the corner. If you were a business or an individual seeking employment and were offered an opportunity in Methuen, you would look up all things Methuen. And what would you think? So, I'm asking you to be more positive. Be like Louann Santos – the most positive resident of Methuen. She makes me a better person, a better resident and a better mayor. She makes me want to do better for Methuen. Just as I said during my inauguration speech, "at first, seek to understand". If you have a question, call me, email me, or come and see me. If it's a question I can answer, I will. If I can't, I'll tell you that and why.

In closing, be reminded that for me this is a labor of love. I have made mistakes, and will no doubt make others, but my integrity remains intact. I am doing this because I want my children to love all the things about Methuen that I do, and I know you do as well. So, join me in 2021. Let's work together, put petty political interests aside and continue to make Methuen a better place, for all of us.

As a reminder, if you have questions or feedback, please feel free to tune in to Mayor's Minutes tomorrow and we will address as many as we can. In the meantime, I ask God to watch over all of you, and wish you continued good health and happiness – take care and be kind to one another.