



CITY OF SALEM, MASSACHUSETTS

Kimberley Driscoll
Mayor

Salem Mayor Kim Driscoll's 2021 State of the City Address January 7, 2021 Salem City Hall

Honorable Councillors and fellow Salem residents, Representative Tucker and Senator Lovely. Congratulations to Councillor Madore on your election as Council President for this year.

I'd like to begin by acknowledging and honoring that the building from which I'm addressing you, Salem City Hall, our City Hall, is – like all of Salem – indigenous land: a place called Naumkeag and home to countless generations of Massachusetts men, women, and children. Earlier this year we placed a Land Acknowledgement here at City Hall, at City Hall Annex, and at the Jonathan Corwin House. Even as we approach the 400th anniversary of European arrival here in 1626, let's never lose sight of the important legacy of those who were living here in 1625 and for so many generations prior.

It's a privilege to address you this evening. As we mark the start of a new year, after a day of insurrection in our nation's capital, I am both enraged and encouraged. Enraged by a day that saw members of Congress sheltering in place as a mob of fellow Americans swarmed the U.S. Capitol intent on disrupting the peaceful transition of power. These tyrants did not just attack a building, they sought to tear apart our democracy - our values, our sense of community and our collective trust in each other. As Americans, as elected officials, as community members, we stand together to condemn this attack and that which brought rise to it.

As maddening and unfathomable as yesterday's events were, and we're still learning more about the details that transpired, I do nevertheless stand before you as an optimist. Encouraged that despite their efforts, these criminals did not prevail. Our sacred democratic process carried on, bloodshed notwithstanding.

And as difficult as the challenges are that lie ahead - from addressing the needs of this pandemic to healing a divided country - I remain hopeful that our best days are ahead of us, certainly here in Salem, in our Commonwealth and even in our country. There are too many of us – hardworking Americans and those aspiring Americans - dedicated to improving our imperfect democracy and tackling challenges - both big and small - for us not to succeed. I stand committed with my partners in local government and members of our community to do our part.

As I reflect on 2020, this was without a doubt, a year of challenge, hardship, and heartbreak.

We've lost 61 of our neighbors to a deadly pandemic and thousands more became sick from it. At its peak, more than 5,000 Salem residents lost their jobs, though our local economy is rebounding and now, thankfully, 70% of them are employed once again.

Despite the months of difficulty, however, Salem has proved itself as resilient as ever. This may be a time without precedent, but it's not a time without hope.

The strength and compassion of our residents, our small business owners, our nonprofit partners, and our own City and school employees are pulling us through.

The number of vaccinations in our community are increasing every day and with that, so too is the anticipation for an eventual end to this pandemic.

Nearly 900 residents have been vaccinated to date and, starting Monday, we'll broaden that to include our first responders. Last week the number of new vaccinations outpaced the number of new COVID-19 cases, and we're not going to let up on that pace.

Salem's response to COVID has been based on science, on data, and on prioritizing the health and safety of our residents and our employees.

In many respects, our community was a pioneer in the effort to slow the spread of the virus. We were one of the first municipalities to use wastewater surveillance monitoring, to fund our own resident community testing program, and to provide weekly surveillance testing to our schools, first responders and essential city employees.

We were willing to make the hard calls – based on evidence – when it came to deciding when and how quickly to re-open or temporarily close down certain aspects of our local economy.

And while we always – always – prioritized public health over public wealth, our economic recovery and support efforts have been so strong and consistent that many other cities and towns modeled their own similar work on what we have done here in Salem.

A sincere thank you and tip of the hat to our hardworking city and school employees who have done so much - from opening "streeteries," setting up test sites, embracing on-line schooling, in-person instruction and hybrid schedules all at the same time - everyone has taken on more than their normal job requirements and I'm grateful for your dedication to our community.

Even though responding to COVID has absorbed so much of our time, energy, and resources this past year, we still have an obligation to remain focused on those issues that existed before COVID – and that will continue to face us after this virus is gone.

Housing, economic growth, food and job security, better transportation options...these issues didn't go away during COVID.

Some might say we can't talk about these things "because there's a pandemic." But – we also can't let fear freeze us or distract us. In fact, it's that very pandemic that has laid bare where our community's needs are greatest. From food security, to eviction protections – from small employer assistance, to the digital divide – from safer multi-mode transit choices, to healthy school buildings – from racial equity, to rental assistance.

COVID didn't make these needs less important or less timely. It pulled the curtain back on what work we still need to do to make Salem a safe and welcoming city for everyone.

Throughout our nearly 400 years, our community has always been the lighthouse on the shore – a beacon guiding generations of immigrants and workers and families to the promise and opportunity of a better life. Planters, sailors, tanners, teachers – those who loaded and unloaded the ships and those who captained them - entrepreneurs and essential workers alike.

They all have built our community and just like in prior years, today's entrepreneurs and essential workers have a need and a right to live in Salem – and when they do, our community is the better for it.

That's why 2021 needs to be the year we work together in a meaningful way to address the cost of living in Salem.

Many families – whether they're new to Salem or have been here for generations – are rapidly being priced out of our city. It's time for real action on housing.

Now, I can hear some out there sighing – “There she goes on housing again.” Well, here's why we're talking about it.

Today, 126 Salem kids in our schools are homeless.

Today, close to one of every three Salem households is paying more than 30% of their income to keep a roof over their head. One out of every three.

Today, for every four low-income families living in Salem, there is only one affordable unit to meet their need.

And what have we, as a community done about it? A measure to require affordable units in new housing was rejected last year. A measure to allow 100% affordable accessory units on existing properties was rejected last year. We finally, after first rejecting it, passed a measure to allow vacant Catholic school buildings to be used for affordable housing, but those units won't be online for many years - and it took us over a year to set up the permitting process to allow it. If you wonder, why do I talk about housing so much? I can tell you with all my heart and soul that what I wonder about is just how these well-intentioned, widely discussed, and urgently needed initiatives could have been rejected.

We will not walk away from these initiatives; we will continue to work harder on these proposals and others until we have made bona-fide progress in making housing in our community affordable to more of our residents.

To be clear, this should not be a duel between market rate housing (which continues to rise in value) or subsidized housing or workforce housing. The truth is we need a mix of people living in Salem to support a vibrant economy. That means we need housing for people who have expendable incomes to support downtown shops, restaurants and institutions and housing for folks who work in those places, as well as for those who don't have a roof over their head and unfortunately can find themselves sleeping in the doorways of those places. The Salem I fell in love with recognizes that we are better, when we work together to meet the needs of ALL the people who live here.

It's important to note that we, as a municipal government, don't own the properties that these initiatives would impact. Frankly, we don't build housing. But we can shape what private

property owners build on their land. – But only if we have the willingness to step forward, be part of finding a constructive solution; to say, yes, we need housing and we need these policies to shape what gets built here.

Now that the state legislature has passed the Housing Choice Bill, it's my intention to re-file the Accessory Dwelling Unit ordinance in hopes of garnering Council support for creating smaller, more affordable dwellings that can exist within our existing housing infrastructure. This is a proven model of success.

Over the next few weeks, we'll be working with our Affordable Housing Trust Fund Board to examine a Community Land Trust model. This last year, we've studied opportunities to leverage existing city or publicly owned land for new housing construction. Some of those options may be feasible, and that work will continue, but even with all cylinders on go, galvanizing the funding, tax credits and permits to move forward is still likely years away, if ever in some instances, from becoming a reality.

A Community Land Trust is a model in which existing housing can be acquired, made available in shorter term at more affordable rents to those in need, and preserved permanently as affordable units for the community. While the full details of this concept still need to be worked out, Community Land Trusts have functioned successfully in other cities and may offer a much quicker way to get local families into units they can afford.

We don't have years and years to wait to solve this problem – as this pandemic has plainly illustrated.

This crisis is real, it's happening now, and it's multi-layered. When rents and prices rise, values rise. And, as value rise, so does the burden on existing homeowners. Nobody wants their property to drop in value, but nobody likes it when increasing value causes tax assessments to increase, too. I get that.

But let's be clear about this: we can't have it both ways. We can't say we want to bring down the cost of housing for Salem residents, but then block policies to require or incentivize affordable housing. We can't claim we want to reduce the tax burden on Salem taxpayers, but oppose reasonable opportunities for growth, which shifts that burden from those very taxpayers.

While we'd like it to be lower, the average tax bill increase in the last sixteen years was half what it was the sixteen years before that, before I first came into office.

How did we manage to stabilize property taxes to that extent? We professionalized the way government operates – bidding contracts, using technology, pursuing regionalization, and securing grants. But the single greatest reason we've been able to rebuild our stabilization funds, hold the line on taxes, and earn the highest bond rating in our City's history is one simple word: growth.

Responsible growth brings homes, both for people who live here now and those who dream about living here. It brings jobs and economic expansion. And it brings reduced property tax increases for those already living here and paying taxes. That's important in a city that is home to so many regional non-profits.

If you want to do something about the cost of housing - for renters, for homeowners alike - we can reduce demand or right-size supply.

In the last ten years we've invested in our parks and open spaces, in improving roads and sidewalks, we've supported public safety personnel and equipment, and worked to strengthen our public schools. We've funded climate resiliency and energy reduction measures, historic preservation efforts, and a diversity of recreational programming for youth, seniors, and families.

We could curtail that kind of investment in our community and perhaps that would lessen our desirability, but I don't think that's what anyone wants.

We could build a wall around Salem and not let anyone else in – make it impossible to build anything new. But that's not the kind of community we've ever been.

So, by the most basic rule of economics – supply and demand – if we want to stabilize prices without reducing demand, we must right-size our supply. That doesn't mean we build anything anywhere, but neither does it mean we build nothing.

And this isn't just about people who hope to live here. It's also about people who do live here. The senior who wants to downsize to single-floor living with an elevator, here in the community where he/she grew up. The young couple trying to upgrade to a larger home so they can start a family or a renter saving for their first home ownership opportunity. The frontline worker who can't find an apartment to rent in Salem but has a job they want to live nearby to.

Salem is as much their home as it is ours. And if we value the diverse nature of our community – a place where people of different incomes, backgrounds, races and religions can all feel at home, then we have a responsibility to ensure that we're doing all that we can to maintain that community character. We can't claim that Salem is for everyone, unless we're willing to work to achieve that and so much of that is tied to being able to meet our community's housing needs.

In addition to housing, being an inclusive City also requires attention and work. This past year we launched the Race Equity Task Force, joined the national Government Alliance on Race and Equity, continued our efforts to achieve Welcoming City certification, wrapped up year 4 of the Salem for All Ages initiative, advanced work on our ADA Transition Plan and, for the sixth year in a row, earned a perfect 100 from the Human Rights Campaign's Municipal Equality Index.

While all these efforts are important and worth celebrating, they don't mean that our work is over. Far from it.

The efforts of the Race Equity Task Force, for example, are only beginning. Welcoming City certification is not in hand yet. There's a lot more to do to fully achieve ADA compliance. And we should continue to strive to earn the Municipal Equality Index 100 score every year.

Doing that, however, means acknowledging some hard truths about systemic injustices in our community, in our Commonwealth, and in our country.

Here in Salem, in the year ahead we will be launching a minority-owned business procurement policy for City contracts and purchasing. We'll continue our efforts to appoint and hire people from a diversity of backgrounds, to better and more fully represent the demographics of our residents. And we'll work through the Race Equity Task Force to identify the steps we can pro-

actively take at the local level to undo systemic racism as much as possible in areas including public education, public safety and public health.

But the resolution of those deep-seated inequities requires a collaborative approach. This cannot be the work of municipal government alone, but rather requires the engagement, willingness and tenacity of our entire community. I know we can make strides in this effort if we work together.

Frankly, that cooperative approach is necessary for so many of the challenges we still face. To make our schools the best that they can be and ensure the success of our students, both academically and as individuals outside of the classroom. To face down our own contributions to climate change, while preparing for its inevitable – and already-felt – effects. To provide true multi-modal options for Salem residents to get around our city, reducing congestion on our roadways and emissions in our environment. And to support a full recovery of our local economy following this pandemic – so many of our small businesses, hotels, cultural institutions – will need our help and a full court press approach to overcoming their current economic hardships.

All of this work is ahead of us.

So, let's make 2021 the year of progress and accomplishment. Let's leave behind any petty political games more suited to Washington DC than 93 Washington Street. Our opponents are not each other – they are the challenges we collectively face as community leaders. Whether it's the day to day work on answering constituent calls and questions, or the longer-term work of planning – and making real – a better City for future generations of Salem residents.

In 1970, former Mayor Sam Zoll in his annual address to the City Council remarked:

“I urge those vested with the responsibility of improving the ‘quality of life’ in the City of Salem to resist the orthodoxies which constitute barriers to responsive government. In a time when crucial innovations must be undertaken in every segment of municipal operation, public officials must not be merely critics of the existing city but be visionaries of a better one.”

I invite us all to join together as visionaries for a better city. Salem is a special place. Our city is not a fragile relic under glass. Rather, it is vibrant, evolving, and dynamic - connected to our history, yes, but not stuck there. Our values may be rooted in our past, but our aspirations - our hopes - those belong to Salem's future.

Let us all be strengthened in our commitment to get this important work done, as we turn the page on 2020, a year like no other, and – together – ensure that Salem is a City that belongs to and works for everyone. That is my greatest hope for the New Year. Thank you and may all Salem families enjoy a healthy, happy, and prosperous New Year.