

State of the City Address

Mayor Noam Bramson

March 20, 2019

Deputy Mayor Fertel, thank you for calling us to order. To you and the entire City Council; to the City Manager and Administration; to colleagues in government, community leaders, neighbors, and friends; to all assembled here at City Hall and all watching at home: good evening.

Please indulge me if I begin this State of the City Address on a very personal note.

It was exactly 50 years ago that my parents made the decision to move to the suburbs.

Theirs was the typical story in many ways: they had raised my three older brothers in Washington Heights, and with a fourth on the way, they needed a little more space.

And, yet, in other respects, theirs was not such a typical story – at least not typical of every suburb. They also had to look after my paternal grandparents, who spoke almost no English and were very much dependent on my father for their day-to-day needs.

It wasn't just anywhere that you could find a home large enough for a three-generation family of eight, yet also affordable enough for Dad's modest salary as a junior-level electrical engineer.

And there was another factor, not-typical of every suburb, and maybe even more important: they wanted to live in a community in which their experience as refugees and immigrants, the products of a different culture, with childhoods of almost unimaginable hardship and violence, would not mark them as aliens to be excluded, but rather kindred spirits to be welcomed with open arms and full and generous hearts.

Fifty years ago, my parents found what they needed on Aberfoyle Road, in the Highland Park neighborhood, in New Rochelle, NY. And I have always been profoundly grateful for their choice.

In the five decades since, a lot of what defined New Rochelle then has remained the same. A time traveler visiting us from 1969 would probably find most things quite familiar.

The neighborhoods, now as then, are charming and varied and distinctive.

Now as then, outstanding schools and teachers prepare children of every background and circumstance for the opportunities of life beyond the classroom. (Even if my own beloved Roosevelt School is now a condo complex.)

Now as then, houses of worship encompass just about every faith, expressed in just about every way, often stirring and sublime. (And sometimes less so: my grandfather was known – accurately – as the man with the worst singing voice at the Young Israel of New Rochelle. A genetic trait I have sadly inherited.)

And now as then, the languages spoken at home draw from the entire world, maybe today with a little less Italian and Yiddish, and a little more Spanish and Malayalam.

So, when it comes to our spirit and our soul, to the places where most of us live and the places where most of us learn, the story of the last 50 years is one of continuity. And thank goodness for that, because all of these qualities are valuable beyond measure.

But there is also much about the New Rochelle of 1969 that was less good.

A half-century ago, our downtown skyline was dominated by the K Building, which, even then, seemed already an aging emblem of a future that never came together, of once-soaring ambitions that had stalled out and crashed to earth. Yes – the downtown still had some strength in 1969, but the trend lines were all wrong, and its decline was well underway. In fact, one of my earliest memories as a child is holding my mother's hand at Bloomingdale's on Main Street – not long before that iconic store closed for good.

And it wasn't just the downtown that seemed broken. The city was littered with planning errors, big and small.

Expansive stretches of the waterfront were frustratingly off-limits, occupied by garbage trucks, power stations, supply depots, and contaminants.

Wrong-headed urban renewal strategies had bulldozed enormous multi-lane roads through neighborhood after neighborhood, with over-engineered arteries like Cedar Street, Quaker Ridge Road, Palmer Avenue, and Memorial Highway ripping away the fabric of community life in favor of a long-since-discredited cult of the car.

While, at the same time, other arteries, like North Avenue, suffered the reverse problem -- a traffic-snarled hodgepodge of utility lines, gas stations, and billboards.

Your choice was to get nowhere fast or somewhere slow, and don't even think about walking.

And our crime rate! In 1969, New Rochelle experienced a staggering 796 burglaries. That's nearly 10 times the number in 2018 – a figure that today, we would consider absolutely intolerable, and would have residents marching on City Hall with torches and pitchforks.

The truth is: my parents arrived here just as many others were leaving. The city was shrinking for the first time in its history. And fast. In the two decades after they settled down, New Rochelle lost more than a tenth of its population – a net of 8,000 people departing for what they perceived to be greener pastures. It was just commonly-accepted wisdom at the time that older inner-ring communities like New Rochelle were on the wrong side of history, powerless in the face of newly-built cul-de-sacs, distant exurbs, and the general abandonment of urban cores and the cities close to those cores.

So, with such a blend of ups and downs, strengths and weaknesses, it's no surprise that the decades since have featured an ever-present, sometimes intense, debate about how to balance preservation and change, how to assign the right values to the past, present, and future, how to hold on to the things that are truly important, while having the wisdom and courage to set aside the things that hold us back.

That is never a perfect process, and there have been plenty of mistakes and reversals along the way. Nor has this process concluded; some of the conditions I described – they're still here, we're still wrestling with them, and, to some degree, always will be.

But I am convinced that, together, as a community, we have gotten most of the big things right. And, today, with the perspective of five decades, we can be very proud of what New Rochelle has become. Here is what our time traveler would find . . .

In 2019, New Rochelle is a growing city – growing faster than almost any other in New York State – with the most ambitious downtown development plan in the entire Hudson Valley, a plan that is attracting unprecedented investment, bringing life and energy to our city's center, from the street-front to the skyline. It has been thrilling to see the trajectory of our downtown shift so dramatically from the slow, painful decline I witnessed as a child to the rapid ascent we see today. And while growth brings a host of important planning challenges, which demand and have received our careful attention, how much better it is to live in a place where more people are coming than going.

In 2019, New Rochelle is a safe city, with the lowest crime rate since the Eisenhower Administration. Thank you to our First Responders – to New Rochelle’s finest and bravest – for their professionalism and dedication. Thank you to our Youth Bureau for innovative programs that prevent conflict like North Avenue Outreach, and that build character like the Strive Leadership Academy. And thank you to our community partners, social service providers, My Brother’s Keeper, and houses of worship for making sure all of us are guided in positive directions and encouraged to make the most of our lives.

In 2019, New Rochelle is a green city, delivering 100% clean electricity through renewable energy certificates, expanding our electric vehicle fleet, planting hundreds of trees every year, and launching the first bike share program in Westchester. We’re even making this our first reduced-waste State of the City Address, thanks to DPW and to Anna Giordano, who has been a tireless, sometimes literally unstoppable, advocate for waste reduction in our schools and community as a whole. Thank you, Anna.

New Rochelle is a prosperous city, with a healthy fund balance, a record of sound and efficient fiscal management, property values exceeding \$10 billion – up 10% in the last year alone – and the best bond rating in more than 80 years.

We’re a creative city, enlivened by the contributions of the New Rochelle Council on the Arts, the New Rochelle Art Association, the Municipal Arts Commission, the New Rochelle Arts Collective, the Museum of Arts & Culture, sculptures and murals, concerts and plays, and a great Library celebrating its 125th year.

And, in 2019, New Rochelle is a responsible city, that is making vital and overdue investments in our lakes and waterways, in our roads and bridges, and in our playgrounds and playing fields – from Beechmont Lake to Wilmot Pond to the Hutchinson River, from Lincoln Park to Feeny Park to Flowers Park, from Quaker Ridge Road to Pelham Road to Pryer Manor, and then down to and including the sanitary lines that empty into Long Island Sound, with the biggest capital budget in our entire history.

Today, New Rochelle is all of these things and more. And this past year, we received validation of the best kind . . .

- From New York State, we won the coveted and highly-competitive Downtown Revitalization Initiative: \$10 million to forge better economic, physical, and human connections between Lincoln Avenue and Main Street, including the Linc – a new linear park that aims to bind up the decades-old wounds of Memorial Highway.

- And from Bloomberg Philanthropies, we won the Mayor’s Challenge, one of just nine cities in the entire nation to achieve this distinction, with a million dollar award to create an interactive, open source app that’ll empower all of us to use augmented reality to plan for our growth and evolution. It’s Pokemon Go meets Sim City. Useful, accessible, and fun.

So our time traveler would discover that the old wisdom, which once consigned cities like ours to the dustbin of history, had been replaced by a new wisdom that sees in such places enormous value and possibility.

As we gather this evening in 2019, from Westchester to Albany to Washington, New Rochelle is recognized as a leader and a model, with greater promise and brighter prospects than at any time since my parents first turned the key at 86 Aberfoyle Road 50 years ago – greater promise and brighter prospects than most of us, maybe all of us, can remember.

My colleagues, friends, and neighbors: the State of our City is not just strong, it is the strongest it has ever been.

And now, with momentum on our side, we roll into a new year of action and achievement.

This year, our downtown will continue its remarkable resurgence as new towers begin to rise at Church-Division, on Lecount, and on North Avenue, and as a host of other projects commence construction. Since adopting our development framework, 21 projects have been approved, 5 more have applications pending, and 11 are already in the ground. Even a gas moratorium won’t slow us down, as builders and investors, confident in our city’s future, forge ahead with sustainable alternatives for heat and power.

This year, we’ll continue our progress toward a clean, beautiful waterfront that’s open to our entire community. A new public works yard is under construction right now at Nardoizzi Place, allowing us to relocate our DPW fleet and headquarters from the shoreline. And an environmental review is underway right now for Pratt Landing, which will connect East Main Street to Long Island Sound for the first time not just in my fifty-year life, but for the first time in the life of anyone here.

This year, we’ll take fresh steps to honor New Rochelle’s rich and vibrant history. A committee of community leaders and volunteers, led by Council Member Albert Tarantino is examining reuse options for Wildcliff, our Department of Parks & Recreation is reviewing expressions of interest for the Ward Acres Barn, our

Department of Development is shaping a Preservation Plan to identify the structures and sites worthy of protection or recognition, and our historic train station is getting a much-needed paint job.

This year, we'll formulate a program of implicit bias training for our entire Police Department, building on New Rochelle's already strong record of supportive Police-community relations, and demonstrating that effective law enforcement goes hand-in-hand with fairness and justice for all the residents we serve.

This year, the City will expand its successful branding campaign, with new promotional videos and advertisements that celebrate New Rochelle's location, diversity, and spirit. You've seen examples in the hall just outside this chamber, a sampling of the messages popping from posters on the train, to billboards over I-95, to the big screens at Times Square. All helping to affirm a positive, exciting civic image . . . an image that we can feel in our hearts with greater pride, and in our wallets with rising property values.

This year, with Jennifer Lanser and our partners at the Chamber of Commerce, we'll continue to welcome entrepreneurs to New Rochelle, who see the promise of our city and want this to be the place where they launch their first business. Some of them are here tonight . . .

- Meet Jahila Smith. Along with her partner and fiancé, Fitz Blair, Jahila just opened Smoke & Spice on Anderson Street. And in a mere two months, they've already acquired a devoted following for their Caribbean-American cuisine. Jahila's no stranger to the neighborhood – she spent 17 years around the corner working at Monroe College, but this is her and Fitz's first time venturing out on their own, with all the excitement and risk and hard work that comes with taking the leap. And we are thrilled they chose to plant their flag here. Jahila, please stand. And, by the way, they're doubling down on New Rochelle, because Jahila and Fitz also just bought a home here, too. Thank you, Jahila, and good luck.
- Meet Julio Ramirez, who, last summer, after twelve years working for others in the insurance industry, opened his own agency – Brightway – on North Avenue. And he didn't pick New Rochelle by accident. According to Julio, the market is ideal, travel is easy from his home in New York City, and he's thrilled with all the development that's day-by-day improving the business climate and bringing customers to his door. Julio, please stand. Your success will be our success. Congratulations.

- And meet Govinda Raghobar, who opened Encore Esports on Main Street last May. Govinda's homegrown, a long-time New Rochellean. His partner Ryan O'Hara is a Boston transplant. They met through their shared passion for gaming, and they had the vision to see opportunity in a booming field, with a growing market of hundreds of millions of video-game players. Encore is the first modern gaming lounge in all of Westchester – a community hub of fans and friends. And it's bringing New Rochelle as whole into the future of recreation. We'll all be living in the Matrix soon anyway; we may as well enjoy the ride. Govinda, please stand. Thank you, and good luck.

As we attract new business owners, this year, we'll also do even more to welcome artists and artisans, performers, and creative technologists from all over our region:

- At our new black box theater, we'll finalize a partnership with VAEA New Rochelle to bring first-class international talent to a new performance and display venue right on Main Street.
- On Burling Lane, we'll complete New Ro Studios, a six-story, 73 unit apartment building designed specifically for artists, and composed entirely of affordable studios, together with shared performance, display, and work space, where up-and-coming artists on a limited income can find a home, begin a career, and make a life.
- At the just-completed 360 Huguenot tower, this very day, in partnership with RXR, we are launching a contest which offers a brand new luxury studio apartment – rent-free for an entire year. The contest is open to artists who are either living in, or want to move to, downtown New Rochelle. To enter, visit ideallynewrochelle.com and upload a short video on why you and New Rochelle are an Ideal match.
- And, finally, at the IDEALab above the train station, sponsored by the New Rochelle BID, we're welcoming three new fellows, Chris Logan, Hanny Ahern, and Michael Clemow.

Chris is a painter and muralist, looking to translate his traditional body of work into new mediums, specifically augmented and virtual reality, and is excited to engage with New Rochelle residents.

Hanny has been collaborating with a professional dancer who was raised in New Rochelle, recording the dancer's movement using motion capture technology.

And Michael is a conceptual sound artist, whose installations and performances use field recordings, photographs, and objects to engage the audience through listening as a creative act. He'll be utilizing 3D audio to create a more complete virtual reality experience.

Chris, Hanny, and Michael. Please stand. Speaking personally, I can barely comprehend most of what you do, but I know enough to say I am glad you are here, and I have every confidence that your work, and the work of others in similar fields, will come to define New Rochelle more and more in the years ahead. Thank you.

So we're not resting on fifty years of achievements. We're building on them; our progress is accelerating. And all of these steps together not only benefit those of us already here in New Rochelle, including lifers like me – just as important, they are vital to attracting the next generation of New Rochelleans, and the generation after that.

It's a virtuous cycle. A successful community is a magnet for remarkable people, who, in turn, contribute their talents to the common good, and renew the promise of the future.

And if you have any doubt about our community's future, take a look at some of our recent arrivals . . .

Meet Rhiannon Navin. She's originally from Germany, and settled with her husband and three kids in Manhattan, where they enjoyed the diversity of the big city, but craved a little more space and a lot more trees. They fell in love with the Beechmont neighborhood, and with New Rochelle as a whole. And it didn't take long for Rhiannon to give back to her new city, as a forceful and effective advocate on causes from gun safety to the environment. In fact, the first time I ever heard from Rhiannon, it was through an email demanding to know why I had failed to show up at a rally (fortunately, I had a good excuse – I think). And she has brought honor to New Rochelle as an acclaimed author, whose brilliant first novel *Only Child* has received rave reviews nation-wide. Rhiannon, please stand. We're glad you're here.

Recent arrivals like Molly Schultz Hafid. And I love the story of how Molly got here. She and her husband, Faycal, were living with their daughter in Brooklyn, when dear friends already in New Rochelle, Laine Romero-Alston and Domenico Romero, suggested they consider moving up north. Laine and Domenico drove Molly all around town, introduced her to neighbors, sang the praises of New Rochelle. And then, in a twist of fate you can't make up, the house right next door to the Romero's

– on Clinton Avenue – came on the market. And that’s where Molly and her family are today – already, in a short time, making a big difference.

Molly has a 20-year professional background in philanthropic grant-making, with a special focus on advocating for civic engagement among immigrant communities throughout the United States. She’s put that experience to work for us as the Vice Chair of my Advisory Committee on Immigrant Affairs. She’s a strong advocate for public education. And as the cherry on the sundae, to complete a picture of all-American goodness, Molly’s the Scout Co-Leader for Brownie Troop 2692.

And now there’s even a coda to this story. Because Molly, not to be outdone, paid it forward, and brought yet another friend to New Rochelle: Christina Jimenez, who settled in the North End with her partner Walter. Christina is the Co-Founder and Executive Director of United We Dream, and was one of the national advocates who helped create the DACA program. For her work, at the ripe old age of 33, Christina was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship, the so-called genius grant, one of the most prestigious honors in the world. And thanks to Laine and Domenico, and then Molly and Faycal, Christina and Walter are now ours.

Let me ask them all to stand. How fortunate we are to have such leaders as part of the family of New Rochelle, and recruiting for New Rochelle. At the very least, they deserve some sort of commission on the home sales. Keep ‘em coming.

I’m not done.

Look at recent arrivals like Iris Rosario. Now, maybe I am including Iris a little prematurely, because she’s actually still in the process of looking for a home in New Rochelle, moving down from Briarcliff Manor, but it sure feels like she’s already here. Iris is the Administrator of the Women, Infants and Children program at Montefiore, she’s a member of the Local Planning Committee for the DRI, and she co-chairs the team working on pre-school preparation with My Brother’s Keeper. An amazing range of social and civic contributions that touch literally hundreds of lives. And, by the way, let’s do a quick tally of those three organizations . . . Montefiore just received a \$44 million grant to upgrade their entire campus, the DRI delivered \$10 million in State money to New Rochelle, and the City and School District just doubled our joint financial contribution to My Brother’s Keeper. So Iris seems to be a kind of human lottery ticket for every group with which she’s associated. Which got me thinking. Catie and I have college tuition expenses just around the corner, so, Iris, if your home search doesn’t work out, you can just come live with us.

Even when things don’t go as we hope, we can still draw valuable lessons and even inspiration from the people who have chosen to make New Rochelle home. I want to

introduce you to just one more: Dr. Bill Latimer. Shortly after moving to New Rochelle in the summer of 2017, Bill accepted a significant challenge the following April when he became the President of the College of New Rochelle. Along with Gwen Adolph who was handed the incredibly difficult job of chairing the College's Board of Trustees and then Marlene Tuteru who holds that responsibility today, he took on a challenge that demanded strength of will, diplomacy, intelligence, and boundless reserves of emotional energy. Gwen's leadership first, then Bill's and Marlene's, kept the College afloat for nearly 3 years after its financial difficulties came to light, buying precious time in which a permanent and sustainable solution might possibly have emerged. Sadly, we know today that it wasn't to be. And although we are very grateful that a partnership with Mercy College will provide a seamless transition for students and – in all likelihood – opportunities for faculty and staff, the loss of an institution like CNR is deeply painful. The outgoing CNR leadership, together with the City and the surrounding neighborhood, will soon have to confront complex choices about the future of the CNR campus. But that's still to come. For now, I simply want to salute Bill and Gwen and Marlene and all of the dedicated leaders, faculty, alums, and staff with whom they labored so mightily. Bill and Marlene, would you please stand. A noble task performed with honor and skill is no less noble for falling short of its goal. And a bad situation would have been far, far worse, if Bill Latimer, and Gwen Adolph, and Marlene Tuteru had chosen to live anywhere other than New Rochelle. We thank you.

So why have I introduced all these people? (Aside from the fact that I like them.) It's because their presence here says something about New Rochelle. When the Rhiannon's and Molly's and Iris's and Bill's of the world – and thousands others like them – make the choice to be part of our city, it tells us we're doing something right.

They demonstrate in the most compelling and human terms that all the actions I've mentioned, all the accomplishments, all the plans add up to a healthy and strong city, with every prospect of a future that is healthier and stronger still.

And, to be very clear, I'm not claiming that these are my actions and accomplishments alone . . . or the City Manager's, or any single person's. They are the product of teamwork, all of us working together, rowing in the same direction, putting aside ego to focus on what's right for all of New Rochelle.

So in this spirit, I want to ask every member of the City Council to please stand, so that we can recognize their efforts. Lou Trangucci, Al Tarantino, Jared Rice, Ivar Hyden, Barry Fertel, and Liz Fried. Their responsible, forward-looking, no-drama and no politics partnership has been instrumental in all we have achieved. And they deserve our thanks.

And I want to add special recognition to Council Members Fertel and Rice, who are stepping down from their posts at end of this year. They have represented their constituents with energy and passion, and have served all of New Rochelle with enormous dedication. I am grateful for their service and friendship, and let's together wish them well in whatever new challenges they undertake.

I've made the case tonight that New Rochelle's fortunes are on the rise, that the state of our city is historically strong. And I believe it with all my heart.

But please don't misunderstand: this is not an argument for resting on our laurels, not an argument for ignoring serious challenges that still persist, certainly not an argument for leaving behind any neighbor who is struggling, and certainly not an argument for coasting into the future on the tide of past deeds. Exactly the reverse: this is a moment of unique opportunity to do even more, and we must seize it.

What will it take for New Rochelle to be "Ideally Yours" – "Ideally Ours" – for everyone. Here's a partial list . . .

First, let's make sure New Rochelle remains a place where all are welcomed and where it's realistic for anyone to afford a home. Our socio-economic diversity is as much a hallmark of New Rochelle as our racial, ethnic, and religious diversity. So it's vital to continue providing quality housing at every price point, from estates as elegant as anything in metro New York, to the middle class homes that brought my own parents here 50 years ago, to reasonably priced apartments, some subsidized, some not, just right for people starting out or sizing down.

That begins with preserving and upgrading the ample stock of affordable housing that's already here. In the last five years alone, New Rochelle has helped facilitate tens of millions of dollars of investment in nearly 1,000 subsidized apartments, making sure that these essential housing opportunities are preserved for generations to come, with a quality of life that any of us could be proud of.

And as we build new housing, there's an opportunity to do even more. Our downtown plan requires at least 10% of new apartments to rent below-market, with incentives up to 20%, and for deeper affordability.

Already, 650 affordable units have been approved at a range of price points. When we're fully built-out, the ratio of market rate to affordable units will shift toward market – we need that disposable income to support a healthier business climate – but in absolute numbers, there will be many more affordable apartments than there are today, some in stand-alone buildings, most fully integrated into larger market projects.

And these new opportunities make a huge difference; a difference for people like Pearl Henry. Pearl is a 73-year old senior who lives in one of the new affordable units at the Lombardi on North Avenue. Along with her roommate – her aunt, who is 93.

Pearl has been living in New Rochelle for 56 years – she’s got me beat by a few. It was becoming harder to manage and afford her home, but she wanted to stay here, where all her friends are. So when she learned that new affordable apartments would be available, she jumped at the opportunity.

And Pearl couldn’t be happier. She loves her apartment, she loves her neighbors, she says you can always find a friendly face in New Rochelle, and that there’s a great sense of community you can’t find anywhere else. She even loves the trash chute – no more lugging the garbage out to the curb.

And, of course, Pearl’s experience is just one of hundreds. When cops and firefighters, sanitation workers and civil servants, teachers, social workers, and laborers can find homes in the same communities they serve, all of us are better off. When young people just starting out can stay in the communities where they were raised, all of us are better off. And when empty nesters can stay in the communities where they have life-long friendships, all of us are better off.

We’re a better city because people like Pearl Henry can stay. Pearl, please stand up. Don’t you ever move!

If equitable housing is first, then, second, let’s provide real economic opportunity to everyone who wants to get ahead.

Now, fortunately, New Rochelle starts ahead of the curve. One of the great benefits of a transit-oriented community is that, by its very nature, it provides easy and affordable access to the entire regional job market, with bearable transportation costs and reasonable commute times, and without dependency on the expense of car ownership. In other words, our location alone makes New Rochelle an engine for upward mobility.

And when Penn Access is completed in just a few short years, New Rochelle will have the closest train station to Manhattan with direct service to the east and west sides, opening up even wider possibilities for home-to-work connections.

Meanwhile, economic growth right here in New Rochelle is creating new job opportunities locally. And to help our own residents take advantage of these

opportunities, we've partnered with Westhab to establish a First Source Referral Center with one-stop shopping for training, career development, and connections to employment. Already, more than 300 New Rochelleans have been placed. Each a story of perseverance, determination, and self-improvement.

Let me tell you about one of those stories: Dwight Ham

Dwight walked into First Source on the recommendation of his spiritual leaders at Union Baptist Church, and he came with a special challenge: he was a reentry client – someone emerging from the criminal justice system and ready to turn his life around. Through First Source he obtained OSHA training, career advice, and presentation skills. And not long after, he obtained his first stable job in years when he was hired by Iona College. Is it working out? You bet – in fact, Dwight is on track for a promotion.

Because Dwight Ham had the strength of character and the humility to ask for help, and because our community believes in second chances, believes that where you are going is more important than where you have been, he is now in a position to support himself, to be a better husband and father, to contribute to the common good, and to set a positive example for everyone.

Dwight, stand up. You have earned this success, we are proud of you, and we want more people like you to have a real opportunity to succeed.

Third, let's deliver even better value for our tax dollars. We pay a lot to live in this region. (I know that's a big surprise to everyone.) And we deserve our money's worth. A few months ago, I hosted four neighborhood conversations all around New Rochelle. And although the setting for each meeting varied, the priorities were remarkably similar. Number one, everywhere: fix the roads.

Now, as I mentioned earlier, the City has already stepped up its commitment to infrastructure. Last year alone, we committed more than \$5 million to roadwork and maintenance, a big increase over our historical allocation. And that's not even including additional projects funded by dedicated grants.

But I take to heart the message from those meetings. The residents of New Rochelle want and expect more. And so, to the extent we achieve greater financial flexibility through economic growth, let's make sure to expand our commitment to the physical assets that impact every resident's daily experience, that shape our quality of life, and that give us the clearest and most tangible return on our tax dollars.

Fourth, let's live in better harmony with nature. There's a lot of bad news when it comes to climate change these days, and it's easy to feel overwhelmed, but here's the good news: the actions we can take locally don't entail any sacrifice. Quite the reverse, they are positive and beneficial on their own terms.

- By introducing community solar at a new Remington Boys & Girls Club, part of our DRI application, we not only bring clean energy production to New Rochelle, we also cut operating costs for one of New Rochelle's essential service organizations and return cheap, renewable energy back to the grid for all of us.
- By taking full advantage of the New Rochelle Energize Program, we not only reduce our individual consumption of fossil fuels, we also make our homes more comfortable year-round and cut our monthly utility bills. Log on to energizeny.org to learn more.
- By planting more trees, we not only reduce the urban heat island effect and soak up CO₂, we also add to the beauty and graciousness of our neighborhoods and bolster our home values. Visit the City website – newrochelleny.com – to order your own free tree, with seven species to choose from. Catie and I are looking forward to our new cherry tree this spring.
- By implementing the goals of our 10-Minute-Walk-To-Park campaign, and by gradually creating a network of complete streets with sidewalks and bike lanes, we not only reduce our dependence on combustion engines and preserve and expand open space, we also make life healthier and more enjoyable, especially for kids, and prepare ourselves for the expectations, the values, and the demands of future homeowners. By the way, this year we'll augment our bike share program with electric scooters, which are a ton of fun.
- By measuring our own greenhouse gas emissions more effectively, we not only provide a benchmark for measuring progress on climate challenges, we also introduce the rigor of data collection and data-informed decision-making to local government as a whole.
- And by strengthening our partnership with Sustainable Westchester, which has been such an effective advocate and sponsor of regional environmental initiatives, we not only take advantage of specific programs related to electric vehicle purchases, community choice aggregation, geothermal heating, and more, we also strengthen inter-municipal partnerships that improve efficiency and collaboration across the board.

None of these steps are remotely adequate substitutes for national and global action in the face of an ever-more-urgent emergency, but they do align our city with countless others that are equally committed to meeting this challenge, including the 3,500 organizations that have said “We Are Still In” the Paris Climate Accord. And they place New Rochelle firmly in the camp of generational justice for the children and grandchildren whose lives tomorrow will be shaped by our actions today.

Lastly, let us embrace this moment and celebrate our city, with confidence and pride, and a sense of common purpose.

Now, I know it’s easy to live in the silos of our neighborhoods or peer groups or houses of worship, because those smaller worlds can be very fulfilling. But we should see ourselves also as part of a larger community, with lives and interests that are ultimately bound together.

Part of this is as simple as showing up and supporting the events that transcend boundaries and belong to all of us. The Independence Day Fireworks, the Thanksgiving Parade, the Friday and Saturday Farmers Markets, the North Avenue Mile, ArtsFest, the annual Street Fair, the Summer Concert Series, and on and on and on. These are great experiences, that will get even better thanks to a new partnership between the City and an events management group called iDEKO.

Or maybe start your own new community tradition. Just look at the example of the Paine to Pain Half Marathon, which, in the last decade has grown into a joyful event attracting about a 1,000 runners to the Colonial Greenway. All thanks to the singular vision and determination of Eric Turkewitz. Eric, please stand.

And part of it is something more fundamental. Let’s be advocates for New Rochelle. Not blind advocates, not uncritical advocates. When something’s wrong, we should say it. When we have a strong opinion, we should express it. But advocates, nonetheless, who come at our debates, whether in person or online, with a constructive spirit and a desire to lift each other up.

You don’t have to agree with me to meet that standard. I’ve got proof. I want you to meet James O’Toole. James, please stand. Now, there are a few reasons why James might look familiar. He’s been in this chamber many a time over the years to offer opinions on just about every subject, often right, occasionally wrong, but never in doubt and never boring. He’s a fixture at Dudley’s, a resident and advocate for the downtown, he even ran against me for mayor four years ago. Forced to admit: he did pretty well, too. And, even today, James still finds time in his busy schedule to beat me up real good on social media, and to do it with gusto. In sum, it’s fair to say that James and I probably disagree on just about everything.

But I have never doubted for a second that he loves New Rochelle. That he wants this city to succeed and pours his heart into that goal. And so I honor him for showing up to make a difference. And I'll even admit tonight that I secretly like the guy – I can't help myself. So thank you, James. (And now, please just stay off Facebook and Twitter for a little while.)

If we can all show up that way, seeing our debates, even the toughest and most intense, as a way to find together the best way forward, knowing that we all offer our views in good faith, then New Rochelle will do very well in the years ahead, and all of us will deserve credit for it.

And let's please especially keep this mind when it comes to our public schools.

It's no secret that the School District is emerging from a period of difficult challenges – last year, I devoted most of this speech to that topic. But through every turn, what really matters most – the classroom experience and the fellowship among students – has remained superb. I can attest to that as a parent; we are thrilled with our boys' education and would recommend the New Rochelle schools to anyone.

What each of us says to friends and neighbors on this subject is more impactful than any official message from a mayor or superintendent, and the future of our school system is in all of our hands.

Maybe there's a larger lesson in that statement. For so many of the things that truly count, the City government is not the only actor, or even the primary actor. Our community is shaped instead by the innumerable decisions we all make to leave or to stay, to buy or to sell, to speak up or remain silent, and in moments of particular challenge or crisis, to come together as one or divide into many.

I am thankful that, in the fifty years of my life, those innumerable choices made by innumerable people have shaped New Rochelle for the better, and laid a strong foundation from which to build the next 50 years.

So permit me to conclude in the same personal terms with which I began. Catie and I welcomed our boys into the world in 2003 and 2005. It has been such a joy to watch them retrace familiar steps, walk through the halls of the same schools, kick a ball on the same fields, debate issues at the same model congress. And even if Friendly's has become Cosi, and Leo's has become Gemelli's, and the Mall has become New Roc – not to mention my old Atari 2600 becoming an X-Box – the spirit of their interactions with friends, the gradual steps toward independence, the growing understanding of different circumstances, in a community that both reflects and contributes to the larger

world – all of that carries such resonance for me and such hope for the people they are and will become.

They won't reach their own half-century marks until 2053 and 2055. And so maybe it's a little early to make decisions about where they'll be living then, where they will choose to lay down roots -- every child deserves a chance to find their own path in life. But I want to believe that they could live here. That it would be reasonable for them to live here. That this will still be a city that respects its past, that celebrates its present, and that is excited by its future. And that the choices we make today will ensure it is so for my children and for all of our children.

I have made the case that the State of our City is as strong as it has ever been. I believe that through and through. But that does mean it is as strong as it can be. That work still remains, for all of us.

Thank you for listening. Have a good night. And may we each in our own ways, serve and strengthen the community we share.