

## FRAMINGHAM STATE OF THE CITY ADDRESS JAN. 31, 2022 Transcript

Good evening and welcome to my first State of the City address. The charter for the City of Framingham requires the Mayor to make an address on the state of affairs of the City to the community in the month of January including the first year of taking office, notwithstanding the fact that a newly elected mayor may have been in office only a few weeks. Tonight's address is presented virtually without any live audience in attendance due to concerns about the coronavirus. As required by the charter, the community has been invited to watch this address on the local government access channel as well as the city's Facebook page.

Throughout my campaign, and indeed since my inauguration, I have repeatedly vowed that my administration will be open, accessible, and transparent and I believe the community has already witnessed this. I am committed to bring a spirit of cooperation, respect, and civility back to City Hall.

Since the onset of the pandemic, we have learned the importance of being able to pivot when needed. Nothing was more evident than my inauguration. Despite the fact it was very limited in attendance, it was inclusive and reflected all that represents this wonderful City. My sincere thanks to those who participated and the team that had a hand in making it a moving experience.

Running a city takes committed and dedicated employees and I would like to acknowledge and thank each and every one of our employees who show up and work tirelessly each and every day. This was no more evident than the tremendous job the employees did on tackling the blizzard that we experienced over the weekend. The services that they provide are unparalleled and I want them to know that they have my appreciation, respect and support.

Although it has just been 31 days into my administration, every day has been informative and invigorating. My staff and I are working diligently to fill vacancies and complete the rebuild of the new administrative team.

Unfortunately, the overall hiring process has been stymied due to the lack of support from the prior administration during the transition period. This created a challenging situation getting positions posted, and in some

cases, funded, which hindered the ability for my administration to begin adequately staffed.

I am pleased to report that, so far, my senior mayoral team is composed of Chief Operating Officer, Mike Tusino, Chief Financial Officer, Louise Miller, Chief of Staff, Susan Nicholl, and Executive Assistant, Jenn Nall.

Tomorrow night, I will be presenting to the City Council for their approval the new **HR Director, Kathy O'Leary**, a Framingham resident, who will begin in a few weeks. I look forward to working with Kathy to fill the remaining vacancies in the Mayor's office as well the many vacant positions throughout the administration.

I am also pleased to announce that we have hired **Kez Franca as the new Citizen Participation Officer**. She was born and raised in Framingham, is fluent in English, Portuguese, and Spanish, and comes to us from the office of equity, diversity, and community development in the Framingham Public Schools.

I will also be submitting Kez's name to the City Council for their approval.

I have spent a great deal of my early weeks meeting with many community leaders, stakeholders, members of our legislative delegation, and representatives of regional and state agencies. They have all indicated that they are excited to share their expertise, knowledge and desire to work with me to make Framingham the successful City of which we can all be proud. They know that my door will always open and that we can accomplish a lot when we commit to working together for the betterment of all.

My transition team is in the final process of compiling the reports from the nine committees. Over 60 volunteers, representing the community, worked on outreach to help support my efforts to identify areas to improve the way we deliver services in the City. I thank all of them for their commitment to complete this valuable work.

As I stated in my inauguration remarks one of my priorities is to jump-start the acquisition of the Bruce Freeman Rail Trail. I am pleased to report that I have reached out to CSX and begun conversations, which I intend will lead to an agreement to purchase the Rail Trail property.

I also stated I will continue to work on the cleanup of General Chemical. I have met with Senate President Spilka and members of the State Department of Environmental Protection to begin planning the phase 2 cleanup of General Chemical. This will be possible due to a **\$12 million state grant shepherded by Senate President Spilka.**

Additionally, I have met with City Solicitor Petrini and others to continue the complex work to clean up Mary Dennison playground and proceed with its development so that it becomes an area of pride and enjoyment for the neighborhood.

My staff and I have reached out to a number of state and regional agencies involved in the area of economic development to revamp our efforts in revitalizing the city's economy. Some of these groups include; MetroWest Chamber of Commerce, the 495/MetroWest Partnership, MetroWest Regional Transit Authority, and the Metropolitan Area Planning Council, to name just a few. The overarching theme is the enthusiastic response to have a team to work with in Framingham to galvanize partnerships with these organizations.

One of the subjects that consistently came up was how to improve our economy and the need for revamping the way that we foster economic development in the City. I will follow through with the requirement of the Charter to provide a plan to reorganize the planning and economic development department. I will explore the opportunity to involve the newly proposed Economic Development Corporation and other relevant committees. By accomplishing this, it will provide a pathway for desperately needed creative economic development in the entire community. Local business enclaves are the backbone of Framingham's economy, and it is critically important to help them sustain their existence.

This includes our downtown, our small businesses throughout the City, as well as large property owners and companies that may be suffering from vacant office and commercial buildings due to the pandemic.

This month has been filled with meetings and listening sessions with a wide array of constituents and agencies that represent Framingham. I have met with the President and CEO of the MetroWest Chamber of Commerce, the Lieutenant Governor, the Senate President, members of our State legislative delegation, the Secretary of Transportation, the State Highway Administrator, the Director of Strategy and Business Development for the

Commonwealth, the Executive Director at 495/MetroWest Corridor Partnership, the Framingham Board of Health, the Rotary Club of Framingham, the Framingham Small Business Association, Father Toniazzo of Saint Tarcisius, Reverend Lloyd, of the Greater Framingham Community Church, Pastor Ramos, of the Waves of Revival Church, and the Presidents of Framingham State, and MassBay Community College, and more, to foster relationships that have been stagnant. To a person, each and every one that I have met is eager to renew or begin the opportunity to work cooperatively with my administration.

In order to address the COVID situation in Framingham, I met with the Board of Health for a listening session with the community regarding the implementation of a mask mandate. As a result, I issued an executive order implementing a mandatory citywide indoor mask policy. Shortly thereafter, the Board of Health voted unanimously to sign on to that executive order.

On my first working day as Mayor, I met with the Director of Public Health, and together we crafted a plan to distribute the remaining at-home COVID test kits that were given to the City.

There are additional important issues that need the immediate attention of my administration. Over this first month, we have taken the time to understand the issues, their origins and have begun to develop an approach to resolve them. There is no doubt that some of the ultimate solutions are going to be challenging.

The most significant problem we currently face is the funding of our water and sewer system. During the last few years, the system has run a very significant deficit. The prior administration did not focus closely enough on expenses and controlling them, and refused to raise rates when it was needed. The current existing rate structure is nowhere near enough to support what is being spent. The system has been seriously underfunded.

Last summer the previous administration elected to use over \$6million of American Rescue Plan Act funds to support the system. This unexpected availability of funding helped to avoid a rate impact that would have been more than double the 9% increase that was assessed. But these funds are limited, would be better used elsewhere, and will not be available again. We must adopt a sustainable solution.

I have pledged to be transparent and will always be honest with you. The only way to fix this situation is to institute a rate increase. We are in the

process of hiring a rate consultant to advise us, but the increase will likely be significant. I recognize this a painful realization for many but there is no choice given where we are and the lack of proper rate setting in recent years.

What I will promise is that going forward we will operate this enterprise in a way that leads to manageable and predictable rate increases. We will plan our spending over the long term and scrutinize every dollar of expense. I will make the required and correct rate setting decisions, notwithstanding their political consequences.

The general fund budget, which I will offer this spring, will be challenging to craft. Our free cash balance, a significant component of recent budgets, is the lowest it has been in over a decade. There has been heavy reliance on free cash to fund the budget in recent years and this practice has taken a toll. Due to the large amounts of free cash used to fund the budget and subsidize the enterprise fund deficits, the current available balance is understandably now lower as a result.

Our balance is just under \$8,000,000 now, versus nearly \$14,000,000 a year ago. The significant decrease in free cash balance narrows the revenue options available for the FY '23 budget and greatly enhances the challenge of developing a budget to meet our needs. In order to develop a balanced budget, as we are required to do, we will take a close look at making our operations more efficient and effective so we can balance our revenues with expenses. We will look at new approaches in many areas of our government, including the way we communicate with constituents, the way we procure legal services and the operation of our planning and economic development department, to name a few. As I have pledged, I will work cooperatively with the City Council in developing the FY '23 budget.

Framingham's greatest resource continues to be the many wonderful, engaged, committed people that live here and work here and I would like to acknowledge several of them who have gone above and beyond this past year.

The COVID pandemic has changed the lives – and cost the lives – of so many. It has isolated us, saddened and burdened us in so many ways, but it has also challenged us — to step up, to serve our community and to aid our neighbors in need.

One person in particular who stood out in our community for the way in which he rose to these challenges and gave of himself to make our community – and the lives of people in need better, is **Shivang Patel**. His business, Metrowest Pharmacy on Union Avenue – has truly been a lifeline for so many Framingham residents. Along with Nicole Doak, who started the Framingham Coronavirus Community Outreach group, Dr. Patel worked to and still continues to provide medicine, medical supplies, vaccine clinics, free testing, an 800-number vaccine hotline and so many other initiatives geared toward helping Framingham weather this pandemic with dignity and compassion. To Shivang Patel and Nicole Doak – thank you for helping to make Framingham better.

Sadly, in recent years, we have seen a massive increase in uncivil, nasty and often hateful political discourse by people who condemn the viewpoints, beliefs and actions of others – people who can't seem to disagree politely or respectfully. We see it all day long on social media. And unfortunately, we've also seen a corresponding decline in civic engagement. In some cases, people fear the online attacks they might have to endure when publicly supporting an idea or position. In other cases, apathy or other priorities have made it an enormous challenge to get volunteers for municipal boards, and other critical civic roles.

It's in this vein that I recognize and applaud someone who recently stood out from the crowd and got involved – thoughtfully and respectfully. Several weeks ago, I, along with a group of other City and School Department officials announced a policy decision to pause youth athletic and other extracurricular activities, in the midst of, and in response to the most recent COVID surge.

One affected student athlete wrote a letter to me and other officials, to voice her disappointment and put forth her reasoning why we should reconsider our policy. I've said all along, that as your Mayor, I'd listen, and take input from people. **Sophia Tersoni, an FHS junior on the varsity hockey team, did precisely what we encourage people to do.**

We heard from Sophia and many others, who convinced us to review and revise our “pause” on the athletic and other extracurricular activities. The result was a new policy that would still protect the safety of our community and allow the students to return to the activities that they love. This is just

one example of how my new administration listens and respectfully responds. To Sophia Tersoni, thank you for helping to make Framingham better.

Finally, all too often we take for granted our first responders, front-line healthcare workers, and those who have had to show up at their places of employment and not had the luxury of working from home over the past two years to serve our community. These unsung heroes have sacrificed more than most of us can imagine. They ensure that those in need receive the programs and services that these individuals have committed to provide. Framingham has a robust community of first responders and front-line healthcare workers, and you have my promise that our City will not forget all that you have done and continue to do day-in and day-out no matter the time of the day or night. Thank you for helping to make Framingham better.

In the past four weeks, my preliminary review of the status of the City indicated a number of challenges and concerns. However, in my discussions with division heads and members of their staff, I have sensed a new feeling of optimism and excitement to work together to solve these issues. I look forward with enthusiasm to working with everyone to achieve our goal of making Framingham better.

In closing, I would like to quote some words of Martin Luther King Jr. that resonate for me today. "There comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but he must take it because conscience tells him it is right."

Please know that not every decision that I make may be safe, nor political, nor popular, but it is in the spirit of my commitment to make Framingham better for all.

Thank you all and goodnight.