

Mayor Fuller's Annual State of the City Address February 20, 2024

To my fellow residents of Newton, to those who work in Newton, to my colleagues who work for Newton in City government and the Newton Public Schools, to those who serve as elected officials in Congress, at the State House, and as part of our School Committee or City Council, to volunteers giving their time and talent to so many Boards, Commissions, and groups in Newton – as I come before you to address the state of our city, I am conscious that our civic body is still recovering from some bruising trials.

The state of the world, the country, the Commonwealth and our city show signs of stress.

The challenges of our times are manifest: illness, isolation and loss of learning from the pandemic, financial insecurity, wars overseas unsettling us at home, expensive housing, disagreements over zoning and development, the lingering impacts of a teacher's strike, migrants searching for a better life, flooding and climate change, traffic congestion and long commutes . . . to name a few. These headwinds weigh heavily on all of us, fraying social bonds, eroding confidence in our democratic institutions, and fertilizing the dual maladies of anxiety and distrust.

Yet, in spite of all these seemingly intractable issues, I can't think of a better place than here in Newton to wrestle with these challenges and together develop transformative solutions. I remain optimistic and full of energy to take on the work of local governance.

This is difficult work. It challenges all of us to have empathy for those with whom we disagree and to build consensus as we chart the path forward.

The duties of a City government are varied and complicated, and success is measured not by how well we do in just one or two areas but rather in dozens. The rapid progress we yearn to make on one front is often tempered by the responsibilities we must meet on many others, as well as the stubborn truth that our resources are finite and our budget must balance.

Within that field of responsibilities, I want to highlight three that demand special focus now for they are core to what Newton is. As we celebrate Newton's 150th birthday and I look back at the news clippings from the 1870's, Newton has always prized educational excellence, forward looking governance, and up-to-date infrastructure.

First: Educational Excellence

To paraphrase Horace Mann, public education is the cornerstone of our community and indeed our democracy.

We have a visionary, energetic new Superintendent focusing on high standards, high supports, and high respect. Superintendent Nolin brings a track record of using metrics, accountability, and communication to drive both decision-making and excellence in learning.

We just signed a four year contract that improves education for our students, allows Superintendent Nolin to move forward with important initiatives, provides competitive pay and benefits, and works within our financial framework.

We have great teachers who are dedicated to this important work and parents and caregivers who are highly engaged.

In the aftermath of the strike, I've heard from so many a deep and heartfelt commitment to healing the many wounds it created and to doubling down on the work of making our schools everything our children need and deserve.

Two months from now, I'll be proposing a City budget that, as always, increases the funding for our schools. This year the increase will be another \$14 million for a total budget for NPS of \$282 million dollars. As I announced in December, this is a 5% increase, rather than the more typical 3.5% possible under Proposition 2½ because of a large property tax settlement with Eversource last summer.

With this increase, our Superintendent will be able to hire additional staff, to improve curriculum and pedagogy, and to address class sizes.

Education is our top priority. We will need to keep investing in education, ensuring that the future of our public schools in Newton is bright.

Second: Forward Looking Governance

Our values are intertwined in the actions we're taking in housing, support for small businesses in village centers, sustainability, and human services.

As a result of recently updated village center zoning, affordable and market rate housing mixed in with retail and restaurants will be more possible. This zoning stems from a combination of hard work and compromise by City Councilors backed by a new state law. Thank you, City Councilors and Director of Planning & Development Barney Heath and your talented team, for helping people live better and businesses do better.

We will be moving away from fossil fuels as these buildings are built or rebuilt as we embed electrification this coming year in our ordinances with the leadership of Ann Berwick and Bill Ferguson, our Co-Directors of Sustainability.

We'll plant more trees and take better care of those we have, thanks again to compromise by City Councilors on an updated Tree Preservation ordinance in December and the leadership of Marc Welch, Newton's City Forester.

Our lowest resourced families in Newton will have a more secure future as a result of the [Newton Thrive](#) program and residents experiencing substance use disorders and mental health challenges will have access to more help. I want to thank, in particular, Linda Walsh, our Commissioner of Health and Human Services, Ruth Hoshino, Director of School Health Services, and Meghan Kennedy, Director of Social Services for their work on behalf of our residents of all ages.

In addition, we have talented Department heads committed to the philosophy of continuous improvement so the ongoing aspects of city government – providing public safety and customer service, inspecting and responding, plowing and sanding – will keep getting more effective and more efficient, more respectful and more inclusive.

Third: Up-to-Date Infrastructure

We've been making steady improvements to our infrastructure - roads, school and municipal buildings, parks, and fields.

If it feels like that progress is taking a long time, it's because of how deep a hole we started in. But our momentum is accelerating. I can tell you the next few years are going to be really exciting here in Newton as the thousands of hours of planning and preparation by residents, councilors, school committee members and staff bear fruit all across the City.

Let me talk first about our buildings.

We're in the midst of the busiest municipal building design and construction period since the Baby Boom in the 1950's. Thank you Josh Morse, our Commissioner of Public Buildings, and your team. We have four major school building projects . . . two entirely new elementary schools - Countryside and Franklin, a new home for another elementary school, Lincoln-Eliot, in a substantially renovated building with an addition, and a much needed further addition and renovation for the Horace Mann elementary community. These new school facilities will be places that welcome, embrace, and inspire our children and are designed to help our educators serve all types of learners. Each of these are designed through the lens of energy efficiency and electrification. We're also "surging" our school maintenance projects – from roofs and boilers to bathrooms and parking lots.

We're working on a large project at Jackson Homestead, an overhaul of our Police facilities, the conversion of the Library and Fire Station #2 to fully electric heating and cooling systems, and another large phase of solar which will generate more than 1.5 million kilowatt-hours of electricity. With this additional solar, close to 40% of our total municipal electricity consumption will be offset by our solar arrays.

Kudos go to our Parks, Recreation and Culture Commissioner Nicole Banks. With her team, she created an aggressive and comprehensive investment plan for our parks and recreational spaces. Two new pools and our first major splash pad will be finished at Albemarle in time for this summer's swim season. Our sustained investments in better athletic fields across the city will continue, bolstered with lights and new turf fields at Newton North and Albemarle following the replacement of two turf fields at Newton South and new lights for both. We are renovating tennis courts and playgrounds, planting a north-side community garden, and bringing six courts dedicated to pickleball to Albemarle.

And, our roads . . .

If there's one thing I've consistently heard from residents since before I was elected as an Alderman and on through my tenure as City Councilor and Mayor, it's the frustration about the state of our roads.

When I first became Mayor, I gladly picked up the baton from Mayor Warren who inaugurated the Transportation Network Improvement Plan with support by voters who said "yes" on additional funding for roads in an override. With that robust plan, we increased the Pavement Condition Index (or PCI), a metric used to measure the condition of our roadways, from 62.5 when I first took office six years ago to 72 in the fall of 2022. We're more than halfway to our program goal of a PCI of 80 when we can shift from a catchup to a maintenance mode and we have Jim McGonagle and Shawna Sullivan, our Commissioner and Deputy Commissioner of Public Works, and their team to thank.

In the last year, using ARPA and Free Cash, we've greatly accelerated our road paving with a special focus on neighborhood roads in the worst condition. Last year, we paved more than 50 of these and a similar number are in the pipeline.

While anyone who drives through Newton knows that we still have work to do, please also know that our paving teams will be coming soon to a neighborhood near you.

We are joining these paving improvements with complementary investments in making our roads safer. Traffic calming measures are being installed - bump outs, speed humps, flex posts and more. Pedestrian signals with the snappy name of Rectangular Rapid Flashing Beacons are multiplying across the city, helping children and adults cross streets more safely. We're completing a roadmap for bicycle infrastructure. We'll soon be finalizing a new design for the Newton Highlands village center. We're rebuilding Pettee Square in Upper Falls this year.

Funding to construct an upgraded commuter rail station in Newtonville that will allow frequent service and easy access is a real possibility sooner than we had expected, and, with our continued advocacy, our other two stations will follow.

Our superpower here in Newton is our people, amazing people who are deeply engaged in making our future better . . . People who care passionately about the needs of our community - our youngsters and our elders, our body politic and our centers for community building and learning, the vulnerable among us living on tight budgets and facing difficult life circumstances, and the interconnectivity of our neighbors across all 13 villages.

Let me talk about one woman who embodied all that is good about our City and serves as a role model and inspiration as we rebuild, reengage and reconnect.

This woman cared about everyone in our community. She was passionate about children and students. She served as a secretary at the Underwood Elementary School for 27 years. She tirelessly committed time and energy at the non-profit Newton

Community Service Center (now known as Family Access), helping to establish Head Start, day care, teen programs and health initiatives. She gave much of herself to the Newton Free Library as a volunteer and trustee. She used her voice and her many talents to advocate for our older residents, breathing life into our first ever Newton Senior Center at what had been the Newtonville Branch Library – soon the site of our new center, something I'm happy she helped move forward until she passed in 2021 at the age of 97.

This woman was gentle and kind and yet was one of the strongest and most determined people I'll ever know. She was a positive, infectious force.

I'm talking about Audrey Cooper.

Tonight, I'm honored to announce that the center we've informally called the Newton Center for Active Living or NewCAL will officially be the **Cooper Center for Active Living** in the City of Newton.

This building will be a forever reminder of how a person with a very big heart, a deep commitment to community, a readiness to collaborate, and a dedication to the joy of volunteering can make a permanent, positive difference.

I'm grateful to the leadership of Newton's Council on Aging for suggesting that I consider this name.

Join us the week after next on Thursday, March 7, when we will be breaking ground at 10:00 a.m. on the Cooper Center in Newtonville.

This will first and foremost be a place where older residents can explore their interests, share their insights, obtain critical services and connect with others, as well as be a welcoming place for Newton residents of all ages where we can learn, grow and have fun.

State of the City

Let me close by talking about the state of our city.

I say with confidence tonight that the state of our city is strong and our residents are resilient and engaged. We are committed to investing in our youth, our older adults, our



I Photo: With Audrey Cooper in June of 2019 at a celebration in her honor at the Newton Free Library.

neighborhoods and our village centers. We believe in focusing simultaneously on today's needs and those of the generations that will follow.

While we have different opinions, we are all Newtonians and we are all committed to this community. By working collectively and collaboratively, we can address the issues that divide us with solutions that unite us.

President Laredo, Vice President Kalis, President Emeritus Baker and City Councilors – thank you for the opportunity and the honor of speaking tonight.

To the residents of Newton – thank you for caring and for recommitting to our common good in these challenging times.

Let us be led by the example of Audrey Cooper as we resolve to strengthen our civic body with stronger bonds.

I know we can.

Together, we will.