

“Staying in the fight, building a stronger city”

INTRODUCTION/REFLECTIONS

Good afternoon. Honorable members of the City Council, School Committee, State Delegation, and fellow citizens - thank you for tuning in. It is my sincere pleasure to deliver the 2021 State of the City address - the first-ever virtual State of the City, just one of the many changes and adjustments brought about by the pandemic.

It's hard to believe that next month marks one year of dealing with this global public health crisis. In looking back at the past year, it is easy to become fixated on all of the things that we have done to mitigate COVID-19. Our attention and energy was focused, and rightly so, on doing all that we could to keep our community safe. Circumstances are constantly evolving. It

requires us to monitor, assess, and adjust. We are still very much in the midst of protecting ourselves and each other while, at the same time, finding ways to sustain our economy, keep people employed, and reopen our schools.

Last year was a tough one. After four years of disciplined work to stabilize the city's fiscal situation, we were ready to kick off 2020 with a full and robust agenda of targeted investments to enhance our city and community. Then, the local and global landscape completely shifted. We quickly pivoted to what was absolutely critical to lead our city through COVID-19. Everything else was put on pause.

Looking back, optimism around anticipated funding from the

Student Opportunity Act to advance teaching and learning in our schools eroded with growing apprehension that these funds may not be provided. A wave of concern soon flooded over our school community with the possibility of insufficient Chapter 70 educational funding and the devastating impact this would have on our schools. While other communities entered into monthly municipal operating budgets, thankfully the Pittsfield City Council approved our fiscal year 2021 budget. We promised that if state funding for schools didn't come through, we'd go back to the City Council for budget amendments. Fortunately, school funding was sustained and we were able to maintain critical services for you - our residents.

In the midst of great uncertainty, we zeroed in on high-impact

ways to keep our city going. Adjusting to the fast-changing climate by establishing the COVID-19 Economic Relief and Recovery Program, a comprehensive economic package to support small businesses, non-profits, and our residents; by providing easy access to food and supplying Chromebooks to our students after our schools were closed; and creating 13 'grab-and-go' zones to support our restaurants with take-out and delivery services are a few examples of the many ways we came together to support each other.

The challenge of COVID-19, and our subsequent responses, are reminiscent of 2016. It was the first year of my administration and we faced multiple hardships, including a host of complex fiscal challenges that resulted in very difficult decisions. The

path ahead was unsure and discouraging at times. But we got busy, became hyper-focused on finding solutions, and kept pressing forward. When I delivered Pittsfield's first-ever State of the City address in January of 2017, I acknowledged these difficulties, but also made sure to recognize the progress and gains that came along the way. We navigated this uncharted territory by staying true to our core principles: shared responsibility, asking 'how can we,' planning for the long-term, and strengthening our communications with each other all of you. These simple, but powerful, tenets serve as a guiding compass when the future is uncertain. Their effectiveness holds true now more than ever, laying the foundation for deeper collaborations that strengthen and protect our city. A team of dedicated, seasoned professionals are truly committed to the work they do and the city they love. They show up every day

ready to make tough decisions and to deliver what's needed to serve the people of Pittsfield.

In March, when we learned of our first COVID positive case, I acted quickly to establish Pittsfield's COVID-19 Task Force, a group of highly experienced professionals including city and school officials, law enforcement, first responders, leadership from the Sheriff's Office, Berkshire Health Systems, and the Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency. For nearly 100 days, we convened daily. Now, we meet weekly or in cases of emergency. For the past year, this group has come together for multiple conference calls and zoom meetings to review public health data and hash out immediate plans of action. In the beginning, the work was intense and fast-moving, but at no

time did this affect our commitment. It is my sincere privilege to be a part of this amazing team.

I am in a complete awe of all the hospital staff and everyone on the frontlines of this pandemic. In the face of long hours, great uncertainty, and personal risk, you continue to serve our community in ways great and small. I truly appreciate all that you do to support the health and well-being of our friends, family, and neighbors. Thank you.

We must also take a moment to remember and cherish those we have lost to this unrelenting virus. My heartfelt condolences to the families who are grieving. May you find comfort and peace in the quiet moments of remembrance.

MANAGING COVID-19

As we head into the second month of 2021, our fight to end COVID-19 continues with a sustained emphasis on getting transmission under control. At the start of the New Year, we saw just how much a post-holiday spike in case counts and positive clusters throughout long-term care facilities, ravaged our community, impacting the lives of our colleagues, friends, and loved ones. Behind every number, behind every data point, is a person who is loved and cherished. We must never lose sight of this.

Very early on in the pandemic, the COVID task force developed a community impact dashboard to track a variety of data points

and to make the information easily accessible and transparent.

From the beginning of the pandemic through January 29, there have been 2,201 confirmed cases in Pittsfield; 59,643 tests have been administered; and 49 Pittsfielders have passed away.

Today, with cautious optimism, I can report that the public health data is beginning to look promising. The 14 day positivity rate is 3.5 percent which takes Pittsfield out of red and into the yellow category. Data from recent sewage testing used to detect virus concentration in wastewater, further supports a potential downward trend. It's going to take everything in our collective and growing toolbox – continued adherence to safety protocols, testing, contact tracing, quarantining, and vaccinations – to stay in the fight and bring back the joys of life.

Phase 2 of the state's vaccination plan begins today, with a focus on our senior citizens aged 75 and older. I am so grateful that our seniors, especially those without online skills or internet access, were able to get much needed assistance with registration. Between the Council on Aging, the health department, my office, and citizens pitching in to help, our seniors secured appointments. This week, at the Berkshire Community College vaccination clinic, 1,400 senior citizens will receive their first dose of the vaccine. This is a long-awaited milestone in the winding road to recovery.

But we also saw the effect of the limited vaccine supply. Within hours of registration opening, slots for Pittsfield's vaccine clinics filled up quickly. Success for some, frustration for others.

It shouldn't be this way, but this is where we are for now.

Production is underway to boost the federal supply, and when it's available, Pittsfield and the Berkshires are primed to handle what comes our way. Because of our strong partnerships, we have a solid infrastructure in place, proven efficiencies, and an army of vaccinators and volunteers ready to deploy at our local clinics. Our hard work has not gone unnoticed. State officials are recognizing that we have implemented best practices and a model that could be replicated in other communities.

I know many of you are anxious to get vaccinated. The Berkshire County Vaccine Team will continue to add new clinic dates and appointments as more vaccine becomes available from the state and federal government. We are doing

everything in our power to ensure that Pittsfield and the Berkshires gets what it deserves. To stay abreast of updated information and for ease in scheduling appointments as they open up, please visit the newly launched website getvaccinatedberkshires.org.

REOPENING OUR SCHOOLS

Getting our kids back in the classroom is at the heart of everything that we do. Through the many changes, disappointments, and transitions, our entire Pittsfield Public school community – students, families, teachers, administrators, school nurses, cafeteria staff, custodians, and bus drivers – have all adjusted as best they could. And it's been hard.

That's why today marks a significant turning point toward better days. This morning CTE students at Taconic High School, and a small group at Pittsfield High School, returned to school for hybrid learning, and will be followed up by some special education students next week. It is our hope that all students will return for in-person hybrid learning after the winter break.

This decision wasn't made lightly and I understand the concerns that many of you have. To ease your fears, we are seeing positive trends in lower case counts and positivity rates, vaccines are on the horizon, and a significant amount of planning and investment has been undertaken to ensure that our schools are safe for in-person hybrid learning. Air filtration systems have been repaired and upgraded. Daily air quality is

measured. Safety protocols such as masking, social distancing, extensive cleaning procedures, and monitoring students and staff for symptoms are in place. Testing remains a key component of our overall public health strategy. Work is underway to expand testing for staff and students within our schools. We are hopeful that our partner, County Ambulance, will soon be engaged to conduct surveillance testing for staff and students.

Simultaneous to this critical work is the current search for the next superintendent of the Pittsfield Public Schools. A search committee has been selected and their work is underway.

Focus groups representing various constituencies from teachers to parents to business leaders and others are being conducted.

Community input is critical to selecting the next leader for our schools.

ADVANCING BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

Admittedly, much of our attention was focused on COVID-19. However, throughout the pandemic, the city's support of local businesses has not wavered. By the end of 2020, through our Economic Relief and Recovery grant program and the Restaurant Rapid Response program, we awarded a total of 90 grants to small businesses and restaurants in Pittsfield, resulting in nearly \$700,000 in financial support, put to work, right here in our city, helping Pittsfield businesses as they confront the financial strain of this very challenging economy.

While we provided COVID-19 economic relief, we didn't stop there. This past year, we supported one of Pittsfield's long-standing, generational businesses by providing tax increment financing for the expansion of John's Building Supply. On the horizon is the construction of a new hotel also supported by tax increment financing. And, an innovative new business joined us last year. Pittsfield was proud to welcome United Aircraft Technologies to the business landscape. United Aircraft Technologies is a veteran-owned, minority-owned, female led business that has created a new class of sensing clamps for aircraft wiring, which are found by the thousands in each aircraft. The innovative clamp is designed to reduce weight, improve safety, and simplify maintenance while incorporating augmented reality and artificial intelligence. The military-grade thermoplastic clamps are interconnecting, ergonomic and do

not require the use of other hardware such as screws or bolts, resulting in a clamp that is up to 65% lighter than existing products. United Aircraft Technologies teamed up with two other local, long-standing businesses. Sinicon Plastics, will produce the clamps, and SABIC, is their materials provider.

If your business is in need of assistance, please take a look at the available resources by visiting businesspittsfield.com.

Whether you have an existing business or dream of starting one, this website can help remove some of the guess work.

In 2021, we have several key items on our business development agenda. Here's what you can expect to see this year. We will be issuing a request for proposals for the

redevelopment of the former Arace's property on outer West Housatonic Street. For years, this commercial property, which covers about 10 acres and is situated at the western gateway of our city, has sat empty and been left to deteriorate. I am looking forward to seeing creative proposals for redevelopment of this property. Also, I have proposed an appropriation from the Pittsfield Economic Development Fund for the construction of new water and sewer lines on Dan Fox Drive. This infrastructure project will support the redevelopment and expansion of Bousquet and Berkshire West. In addition, these new water and sewer lines will set us up for future growth along the Dan Fox Drive corridor. I have also proposed a tax increment financing package to support Fresh Powder and Blue Chair Properties, the new owners of Bousquet. They project a capital investment of \$11,315,000. Keeping Bousquet open and

successful will offer year-round outdoor recreation for people of all ages and abilities.

And speaking of outdoor recreation, construction of the Ashuwillticook bike trail extension begins this year. After many years of planning, designing, engineering, and funding, Pittsfield will finally have a bike trail extending from the Berkshire Mall to Crane Avenue. With the completion of Bike Facilities Master Plan later this fall we should be well positioned to advance biking in and around the City of Pittsfield.

When it comes to our downtown, we keep investing. We are working very closely with a possible new tenant for our downtown. I can't reveal any details at this time, if we are

successful, this new establishment will add a very unique and significant amenity to downtown community life. We also anticipate the redevelopment of the Wright Building for new market-rate downtown rental units. Down on East Street, just a couple of blocks from downtown, construction is underway for 27 affordable rental housing units at the former Reigning Love church.

Over at the William Stanley Business Park, you will begin to see planning and activity at Site 9. This is the parcel that Walmart considered for a new superstore. We have been working very closely with our local and state partners to move towards significant improvements to make the parcel ready for redevelopment. Stay tuned for more details.

The revitalization of Tyler Street continues to move forward.

Last month, I toured the Morningstar Apartments, formerly St.

Mary's Church, and it is absolutely spectacular. The developer,

David Carver and CT Management, did a magnificent job

preserving the architectural elements of this historic campus.

So many in our community came together to save this beautiful

church from the wrecking ball. I am not surprised that these

market-rate apartments are already 80 percent occupied.

By the end of 2021, Tyler Street will have 36 new market-rate

housing units, thanks to a development project led by Mill

Town Capital. We're doubling down on our efforts to assume

ownership of the Hess Station and while the future of the Tyler

Street Fire Station looked grim, with demolition on the horizon,

I'm thrilled to report that there is promising new interest for this historic gem.

We look forward to the Tyler Street Streetscape project getting underway this year. MassWorks had awarded Pittsfield \$3,000,000 toward this project. Street improvements include a roundabout, upgrades to sidewalks and crosswalks, and other amenities along the corridor.

COVID set back our planning, but we're refocusing our attention on a new police station which will serve the needs of a modern law enforcement agency. This is a top priority for public safety.

NEIGHBORHOOD STABILIZATION

As you know, the neighborhoods in our city have been a key element of the work that I've wanted to do as mayor. This is an all-encompassing effort. It includes the demolition of buildings that no longer have value, pose a danger to public safety, and impact the quality of life in a neighborhood. Another key component for neighborhood stability is the At Home in Pittsfield program. This program will assist our neighbors who may be living in homes that need exterior renovation and repairs in order to interrupt further decline. Most importantly, this program provides a viable pathway for residents who do not have access to traditional financing for this kind of work. At Home's true success will reflect in its ability to decrease the wealth gap by increasing personal wealth and asset value for homeowners that participate in this program. I thank the

Pittsfield City Council for supporting our \$500,000 request from the Pittsfield Economic Development fund. We are looking forward to getting these funds into the neighborhoods in time for the spring construction season.

This past year, I was heartbroken by the trauma that our homeless brothers and sisters experienced when the St. Joe's emergency COVID shelter closed. I acted quickly to ensure that the city, along with our community partners, provided as much care as possible. I am deeply grateful for the sustained response provided by our community partners, for the volunteers who helped in countless ways, and for all the donations given by a generous community. I have learned a great deal about the struggles of homelessness and the many agencies and advocates that work in this field. This year, the

city's housing work will prioritize expanding and improving crisis sheltering with an emphasis on the development of new supportive housing. If all goes well, we will see a new crisis shelter open at the First United Methodist Church with room for 40 guests after COVID regulations have been lifted. The newly formed Homeless Advisory Committee has begun their work to help us advance our number one housing goal for 2021 - securing safe, stable housing for those experiencing homelessness.

ADVANCING DEI

Last year, people from all walks of life, backgrounds and ages came together in solidarity against social injustice and to advocate for systemic change. In Pittsfield, we remain firmly committed to this transformative work. As a government

organization, the City of Pittsfield will lead the way by continuing to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion. I commissioned a study group, led by the city's Human Resource Office, to undertake a comprehensive review of DEI best practices. I'm looking forward to their recommendations later this month. This input will help us formalize initiatives around advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion.

When I think about DEI, I can't help but think about Pittsfield's very own Rev. Samuel Harrison, for whom I have deep respect and admiration. During the Civil War, as chaplain of the Massachusetts 54th Regiment, an all-black unit of soldiers, he petitioned all the way up to President Lincoln for equal pay for the soldiers of the Massachusetts 54th. Because of Rev.

Harrison's steadfast advocacy on behalf of the soldiers of the 54th, they received the compensation they earned and deserved. As we navigate our modern day pandemic, there's an intriguing intersection of time associated with the legacy of Rev. Samuel Harrison. His granddaughter, Florence Jacobs, was the graduating valedictorian for the class of 1908 at Pittsfield High School. Ms. Jacobs went on to earn a nursing degree and after marrying William Edmonds, she returned to Pittsfield and had a successful career in nursing, teaching, and healthcare administration. In 1962, Mrs. Edmonds was named "Mother of the Year" by the Women's Club in Pittsfield.

Today, Rev. Harrison's restored home stands at 82 Third Street. It is one of our city's most prized African-American landmarks.

The principles that Rev. Harrison held true to during some of

the darkest chapters of our history are relevant today. Very soon, I will announce an initiative to honor his legacy for generations to come.

CONCLUSION

In closing - the challenges and uncertainties of this unrelenting global pandemic will be with us for quite some. In some ways, circumstances may even intensify. Our mettle will be tested.

All of the priorities of my agenda are intended to ensure that, as we emerge from this public health crisis, we will be stronger than ever before and ready for good things to happen. Our resolve and tenacity to rebound will prevail. Despite these troubling times, my greatest hope is that you have discovered new traditions, found creative ways to enjoy the company

others, explored the outdoors, and that you, your family, and your friends are healthy and in good spirits.

As your mayor, I am honored to serve you.

Thank you.