

State of the City 2023
Remarks of Mayor Noam Bramson
March 9, 2023

Deputy Mayor Tarantino, thank you for calling us to order. To you and the entire City Council, to City Manager Gill, Commissioners, and colleagues in government, to community leaders, neighbors, partners, and friends, to all present here at City Hall and all watching at home: good evening.

This is the final State of the City Address I will deliver as your Mayor. Naturally, as befits an annual address, I will speak tonight to our most recent progress and actions, but I hope you will indulge me if I also range a little further afield to reflect on the larger and longer story of our work together over the course of a generation.

This year's speech is notable for other reasons, as well.

It is the first time since the pandemic that we have gathered for this event in person. In fact, cancelling the State of the City Address in March 2020 was among our earliest decisions in the initial days of the outbreak. Returning to this chamber now brings for me and perhaps for others a certain sense of closure to our city's surreal and wrenching experience. Briefly the epicenter of the outbreak, the eyes of the world upon us, and then for month after month – longer than any of us could have imagined – joining all Americans and people across the globe in making our way through a crisis like no other. And yet for all the pain and loss, affecting each of us to greater or lesser degrees, and some in ways that are still unmeasured, my primary feeling is one of gratitude for the strength and resilience of our community, and the spirit of common purpose with which we confronted such an overwhelming challenge.

To every first responder, to every essential worker, to every doctor and nurse. And not just them. To every small business owner who struggled to stay afloat, to every service provider and volunteer who fed the hungry or protected the vulnerable, to every faith community that nourished body and soul, to every educator who taught through a screen and every parent who felt defeated by those same screens.

Most poignantly, to every family member who mourned and still mourns -- time moves on, healing all wounds, it is said, but we do not forget and will not forget your labors, your sacrifice, or your grief. And we will always be New Ro Strong.

Finally and most importantly, this occasion is notable because it comes at an inflection point for our community – a moment of transition. Not just in the obvious sense of new leadership: a new city manager, soon a new mayor, but also in a deeper sense. So many of the debates that consumed us for decades are largely settled, old challenges and controversies behind us. Of course, we still have problems and unmet needs, and, like every city, we always will. And yet because of the progress we have made together, New Rochelle approaches now a golden hour, in which all things seem possible.

Consider how far we've come.

A generation ago, this city was almost left for dead. A declining and hollowed-out urban core. Municipal finances in deep crisis. Badly divided civic leadership. An exodus of population, as residents simply lost faith in our future and sought greener pastures elsewhere.

Today, we are the fastest growing city in New York, enjoying a wave of investment and confidence unlike anything in a century.

People of all ages and incomes and interests want to be here, want to raise a family here, want to start a business here. Giving substance and meaning to the phrase Ideally Yours.

The rising skyline is only the most obvious evidence of our growth.

30 projects approved.

12 projects completed and leasing up even faster than expected.

13 more under construction.

Almost 6,300 units finished or in the pipeline, with an additional 4,000 still to come.

As our region and state grapple with an acute housing shortage that hurts everyone, that drives up costs for everyone, that restrains opportunity for everyone, New Rochelle is more than doing its part. We are setting the pace.

More new housing per capita than just about any other city in sight to meet the surging demand, and to bring life, energy, and buying power to a downtown that for too long was starved for it.

And our growth brings more:

8,000 construction jobs. Hundreds of permanent jobs. Opportunities for our residents to build better, more secure lives. Opportunities that we are actively fostering through expanded training programs, requirements for local or union hire, and capacity-building for minority and women-owned businesses – creating an ecosystem of skilled workers and entrepreneurs who are ready to prosper as we grow.

And for our entire community, even those who never set foot in the downtown, a more durable and diverse tax base. With a net increase in revenue of \$230 million for the next twenty years, and \$725 million for the twenty after that.

Not to mention local sales that last year reached an all-time high topping \$1.5 billion – that's billion with a B.

Dollars that are reinvested in community needs, from youth programming to park master plans, from flood mitigation to public safety, while moderating the demands placed on our taxpayers.

Hear me. Well-planned growth is not a threat, as some would tell us, it is an opportunity that we seize in New Rochelle with both hands.

I threw a lot of numbers at you, and numbers tell an important story, but it's not just quantity, it's also quality.

We're shaping a cityscape that is attractive and pedestrian-friendly, with a form-based zoning code that emphasizes the highest-quality design.

We're creating new public spaces where we can gather, celebrate, run and play, or simply enjoy the open water and sky. New plazas at Clinton Park and Anderson Place open to everyone. Pratt Landing bringing public access to the East Main waterfront for the first time in any of our lives.

Biggest of all, the Linc, reshaping half of Memorial Highway into a linear park. A bold transformative vision, and the most ambitious expansion of open space in generations.

And . . . a concept compelling enough to win \$22 million in highly-competitive state and federal grants – a resounding vote of confidence both in our vision and our ability to execute . . . and a tribute also to the effective advocacy of our county, state, and national representatives on these and so many other priorities. I thank them for their partnership.

As we grow, we're emphasizing sustainability as never before. New Rochelle was the first city to adopt the NY Stretch energy code to promote greater efficiency in building design. We now require LEED Silver equivalency for new construction downtown. We've broadened our community benefit bonuses to allow off-site improvements that advance climate justice in areas impacted historically by redlining. And we are creating at our city's heart a neighborhood where you can walk to goods and services, hail a free electric shuttle, share an emission-free scooter, or ride mass transit to the metro core – a place where residents have the freedom to make car ownership a choice and not a necessity.

As we stride confidently into the future, we also cherish and protect the valued elements of our past. Local landmark status for buildings with historic or architectural distinction. And opening soon at 387 Huguenot, a home for the Lincoln Park Conservancy, connecting the Black experience in New Rochelle to the larger quest for racial justice all across America, and ensuring that this defining aspect of our cultural past and present is always remembered and honored.

Lastly, alongside dynamic partners at the Council on the Arts and the New Rochelle Art Association, we're nurturing New Rochelle's creative energy, with countless examples of performances and displays, maybe best exemplified by the twenty world-class murals from Street Art for Mankind that have captured attention far and wide, bringing beauty and meaning, color and conversation.

And, I have to add, because I'm the kind of guy who plans leisure time around food and drink more than paintings and sculptures, that we've got four, count 'em four, new coffee shops, with a fifth on the way, ensuring our city is awake and alert. Plus, with Restaurant Appreciation Week beginning tomorrow, take note that fully a quarter of the Michelin-cited restaurants in Westchester are located right here in New Rochelle. Including Town House, where I have reservations for 8:45pm tonight, a powerful incentive to wrap up this speech on time.

No one denies there is still much more to do, and we won't be satisfied until the commercial street-level energy on the ground floor of our downtown matches the

residential energy above. That's why our planning team is so focused on business attraction, spearheaded by our Retail Task Force, and on place-making, exemplified by great events like the Holiday Market and the Taste of Union Avenue. Plus, coming soon: ambitious plans to remake our transit center into a true community hub, ready for the expanded use arriving with Penn Access.

There are many who deserve thanks for this success. Our creative and determined city hall staff in Development, Buildings, and Law, our partners in the Chamber and BID, our master developers at RXR, and the many other development teams who have together invested literally billions in our revitalization, the community advocates, including constructive critics, who have shaped our plans for the better, and the members of the Planning Board, Zoning Board, IDA, and MAC, who have worked, often late into the night, to move our city forward. Give them all a round of applause.

And there is one other group I want to thank, I need to thank: the thousands of residents and businesspeople, living or working in or near our downtown today, who have had to endure all the growing pains. The utility cuts, the traffic tie-ups, the sidewalk closures, the parking displacement, the dust and the noise.

These are real challenges that can be only partially mitigated, despite our best efforts. So to those in the thick of things, we owe you a debt of gratitude for bearing this burden. And I make you this promise. A stronger, healthier city is coming, you can bank on it, and it'll be worth the hard journey to get there.

Because here's the bottom line: transit-oriented development is the right strategy for our community, it's the right strategy for our region, it's the right strategy for our world. And I could not be more proud that our city, that New Rochelle is leading the way.

I've led with our city's core, because it is so vital to everything else and because it has been such a focus of our attention. But make no mistake, this concentrated success downtown exists within the context of broader success extending from the shore of the Sound to the far north end.

Our commitment to the environment is more comprehensive than ever before and reaches into just about every space.

- In our homes, clean, renewable energy and the option of community solar through Westchester Power.
- Along our curbs, hundreds of new trees, free for any homeowner.
- And, underground, historic investments in sanitary lines to protect water quality.

This year, we'll complete a comprehensive update of GreeNR, New Rochelle's award-winning sustainability plan, to guide our environmental actions for another decade. Doing our part for a healthier community and more sustainable world that we can pass on with pride and not shame to our children and grandchildren.

Our City finances are rock solid, with an impressive bond rating, just confirmed at Aa2, and a healthy fund balance topping \$15 million. Thank you to our Finance Department for decades of outstanding fiscal stewardship, treating every tax dollar as a trust and never an entitlement.

Our crime rate is near a 60-year low, a credit to the dedication and professionalism of our Police, and to their strengthening relationship with the community we serve. Thank you NRPD for your dedication and professionalism, for your engagement in a collaborative process of public safety reform, and for your bedrock commitment to equal justice under law.

Our homes and very lives are protected 24/7 by the bravery and skill of the New Rochelle Fire Department, answering more than 24,000 calls last year alone, calm and competent in every crisis, running toward danger without a second thought, and widely acknowledged as one of the best in New York.

How fortunate we are to benefit from the service of our First Responders, and their EMT partners at Empress, so let's give all of them a round of applause.

As we improve core services, so too we are making generational investments in infrastructure and long-term assets. Indeed, this Council's unanimous decision several years ago to prioritize capital needs ranks among the most consequential and positive actions in the modern history of our local government.

- In 2022 alone, we resurfaced more than a million square feet of roadway, part of a multi-year commitment to bring our entire street network to a higher standard and win the pitched battle against every mayor's arch-enemy: the pothole.

- At the same time, we're making our streets safer and more family-friendly through new crosswalks, edge lines, and signals – with comprehensive redesigns on the way for major arteries like Lincoln Avenue, Quaker Ridge Road, Pinebrook Boulevard, Huguenot, and Main.
- We're completing an in-depth city-wide storm water analysis, covering all six New Rochelle watersheds, with an eye to preventing or mitigating future floods, an ever-more-urgent priority, as climate change turns what-had-been hundred year storms into seemingly annual events.
- And after literally decades of debate and controversy, finally, we have cut the ribbon for a new Public Works Operations Center, ready to address vital service needs for a century to come, while making possible the restoration of the Echo Bay waterfront.

We thank DPW for managing these and countless other projects, and for their daily labors – too rarely acknowledged, yet always essential. And surely DPW deserves at least some credit for a winter season with almost no snow!

We are making generational investments, too, in our parks:

- At Hudson Park and Wildcliff, with a brand new greenhouse at its heart, thanks to the patient dedication of dozens of volunteers.
- An ambitious master plan for Ward Acres, shaped through community dialogue and the stewardship of the Ward Acres Conservancy.
- Ongoing investments at Lincoln and Feeney Parks, with improvements teed up for Maplewood, Neptune, and Huguenot.
- Restoration of Beechmont Lake, after decades of neglect.
- Upgrades to athletic fields across the city for our thriving youth and adult sports.
- And a completely renovated Pinebrook Tennis Center, complete with courts for pickleball. Which I hope is as fun to play as it is to say: “pickleball.”

Thank you to our Parks & Rec team, for these ever-improving spaces, for your outstanding programming, and for doing so much to make New Rochelle a thriving, fun place for people of all ages and all abilities.

And not to leave anyone out, a word of personal appreciation to my closest neighbors in City Hall – the City Manager and City Clerk’s offices, Human Resources, Marketing & Communications, and, of course, my assistant, colleague, and friend Angela Derecas Taylor – who address thousands of individual issues and needs with courtesy and respect, who keep our community informed, who are in so many ways the face of City Hall to the larger world, and who always find the time to say a kind word to the guy in the corner office.

What we have done -- all of the these improvements together – whether hidden underground or on display for all to see, whether experienced in a single day or paying dividends over a decade – add up to a community where every neighborhood can be safe and healthy, where our public spaces are filled with life, where our investment in a home – an investment of faith and trust as much as money – is validated by rising values and the prospect of a bright future. And where all of us can say: I am proud to live in New Rochelle.

I have spoken tonight primarily of change – dramatic change in so many aspects of our city. And yet there are some things, thank goodness, that do not, should not, must not change.

The through-line, the constant, during a period otherwise defined by growth and evolution, has been our unshakable commitment to inclusion and equity.

We reject hatred and bigotry in all its forms, we affirm everyone’s right to be who they are, we embrace waves of immigrants as our own. We celebrate our diversity, knowing that all of us are enriched and ennobled by it.

In some quarters, it has become fashionable to dismiss these values as “woke.” But what does that really mean? That we are awake to the true fact of historic injustice and present-day inequality? That we are awake to the ongoing struggle for a better, more just world? That we are awake to the importance of teaching our children to do right by others, with kindness, respect, and understanding.

By those standards, I'll take awake over asleep any hour of the day.

Love of country or community, pride in country or community, does not require willful blindness to its flaws and failures. Quite the opposite. True love seeks to repair what is broken, to heal what is wounded, to lift our reality until it reaches the height of our ideals. Not the weak tea of tolerance. Love is stronger, demanding more . . . and giving more.

So let us make this commitment. That we will acknowledge that stark inequalities still exist here in our own community, not as historic artifacts, but as real and present obstacles to the life prospects of countless neighbors. That we will have honest conversations about the persistence of privilege and injustice, even when such conversations are uncomfortable. That we will accept our responsibility – individual and collective – to right wrongs, especially those closest to home.

And, in this spirit, let us commit also that the physical and economic progress I have already discussed will be matched by equal dedication to social and human progress.

How.

First, by ensuring that everyone is welcomed. Welcomed in the fullest sense, not just a friendly wave, but given a chance to make a good life, through housing opportunities that are accessible to people of every means.

This isn't charity. All of us benefit when essential workers can live in the community they serve, when young people can stay in the community they were raised, and when retirees can remain in the community they helped build.

Affordable housing is not a new priority for New Rochelle. Today, about 23% of our community's dwellings are below market, subsidized in one way or another, more than meeting our obligations to the region and setting an example of inclusivity.

And we don't ignore the most vulnerable. In recent years, we've helped rehabilitate hundreds of low-income units and senior apartments – preserving vital housing for decades to come, while our Homeless Outreach initiative with HOPE Community Services and Montefiore, along with our Tenant Based Rental Assistance program, have helped dozens of people find a permanent place to live.

Today, we're building on that legacy of inclusion by constructing new affordable housing. Nearly 1,200 below-market apartments approved so far, with more than 200 individuals and families already calling them home. Across a wide range of price points.

We recently enhanced our affordable housing policy to require either more units or deeper affordability or both, and with stronger incentives to include affordable dwellings within market-rate projects, rather than constructing them off-site.

And we're doing more to encourage home ownership, with a First-Time Home Buyer's program, giving dozens of families their first real opportunity to start building generational wealth and stability.

By undertaking these efforts and others, we say to New Rochelleans of all means and origins, present and future: you belong here, you can thrive here, and we're better with you here.

Second, by ensuring that everyone is nurtured, especially our children.

Nurtured through programming, like our Youth Bureau's initiatives to provide employment, mentorship, enrichment, and service, including a record 286 summer jobs last year, and with a new youth center coming soon to New Roc.

Nurtured through innovation, exemplified by the Opportunity Youth Part in the City Court, which enlists some of New Rochelle's most talented residents to serve as mentors, guiding justice-involved youngsters to be their best selves, and serving as a model for courts across the state and nation.

Nurtured through information. Visit our recently updated New Ro Strong web page to learn how you can receive or provide assistance, with comprehensive links to services, agencies, and volunteer opportunities.

And nurtured through partnerships – with a thriving not-for-profit sector to which we have directed unprecedented support through the responsible use of American Rescue Plan dollars. Invaluable organizations like the Boys and Girls Club, about to enter a new era with the opening of the Remington Clubhouse later this year, our city's most significant new youth facility in two generations. Or the YMCA, which provides enrichment, enjoyment, and sustenance to hundreds of local families.

In this vital mission of nurturing the next generation, we are joined by the talented and civic-minded leadership, faculty, and staff of Iona University and Monroe College.

And we are joined, too, by our sister institutions:

The New Rochelle Public Library, far more than a repository of knowledge, but rather a true community hub, in which all of us are invited to learn, connect, and create.

And the New Rochelle Public Schools, an educational system that, in my opinion as a graduate – and Catie and I speaking as parents – is better positioned than any other in Westchester, to prepare students to understand an ever-changing world and make a thrilling life within it. This year, we will work with our School District more closely than ever to create a seamless web of afterschool enrichment, turning those critical hours from 3:00 to 6:00 into opportunities for learning, play, and growth.

There are Library and School Trustees with us tonight. Let's please give them a round of applause in thanks for their volunteer service.

Finally, by ensuring that everyone in New Rochelle is respected.

Equal rights for all, equal opportunity for all -- ideals that are universal and yet also of special importance to communities like ours, which depend so profoundly on the contributions of residents from every heritage, tradition, national origin, and identity.

Sadly, at the national level, generations of hard-won progress seem today at risk of reversal. From the top, federal courts increasingly hostile to minority rights. From the grassroots, a surge of hatred and bias crime. On-line, conspiracy theories infecting the minds of millions. And, in the public square, a casual cruelty, edging ever closer to violence.

With so much at stake, it must be our purpose to keep alive here in New Rochelle the principles and practices of unity, civility, and truth.

Meeting tonight, together as equal stakeholders, equally devoted to our city's success, let us be one community, striving to see the world through each other's eyes, and inspiring the best in each other, until brotherhood and sisterhood are rekindled fully from sea to shining sea.

The office I hold tends to attract the spotlight. I get to stand at this podium, tonight and on other occasions, representing the City and community. But in truth, I am just one of many actors, often in a merely supporting role, deferring to the greater knowledge or authority of others, in a constantly shifting kaleidoscope of coalitions and leaders.

It has been my practice at this event to introduce members of our community whose lives and deeds represent something larger, or whose contributions and achievements are especially noteworthy.

Today will be no exception, but instead of turning the spotlight outward, in my final State of the City, I choose instead to shine it on those who have made public service their calling.

If you work for the City of New Rochelle in any capacity, in any department, please stand. I am proud of you and of all you have achieved, proud to call each of you colleagues and many of you friends. The work you do is meaningful and noble; it transcends the negativity and cynicism that sometimes masquerades as wisdom, and it makes a positive difference to tens of thousands of people. I applaud you. And I thank you.

Of these many public servants, there are twenty-four whom I wish to acknowledge by name. They are the men and women with whom, across nearly three decades, I have served on the City Council, men and women representing both parties and every viewpoint, who have been friends, partners, teachers, competitors, adversaries, and sometimes all of the above at once.

Let me begin with those here with us tonight: Bee Brown, Alex Eodice, Barry Fertel, Liz Fried, Ivar Hyden, Tim Idoni, Sara Kaye, Martha Lopez, Yadira Ramos-Herbert, Jared Rice, Chris Selin, Roxie Stowe, Al Tarantino, and Lou Trangucci.

Several others could not join us this evening, but I still want to acknowledge them: Michael Boyle, Joe Fosina, Roberto Lopez, Jack Quinlan, Shari Rackman, Richard St. Paul, and Marianne Sussman.

And on this occasion, too, we remember with sadness, and gratitude, and admiration: Ruth Kitchen, Rhoda Quash, and Jim Stowe.

These City Councils in succession have been a microcosm of all of New Rochelle, reflecting our city's myriad experiences and perspectives, and also illustrating how each of us is required to work together for the common good. It is not always easy. Not always easy to live or labor side-by-side with those whose views may be very different from one's own, but the rewards are beyond measure.

Because thanks to these twenty-four individuals and to an even greater number of leaders within and beyond the walls of City Hall, New Rochelle has rebounded from recessions and floods, from tragedies and traumas, always coming back better than ever, guided by a clear vision and the will to see it through, and now with the brightest prospects in its modern history. Allowing me here, tonight, in my 18th year as mayor, 28th as a member of council, and 54th as a resident of New Rochelle, to proclaim with absolute conviction: the state of our city is strong.

When I said earlier this was our golden hour, I did not mean that we had achieved a state of perfection or put all problems and crises behind us, but rather that, as never before, our future is in our own hands.

It will be for others to shape that future, to take our hard-earned progress, our newfound capacity and resources and momentum, and apply them to fresh goals. But I take great satisfaction in knowing that our city – like a ship, swift and sure – is ready to go boldly and in full sail to any shore we choose.

May courage, wisdom, foresight, and kindness guide the journey ahead, and may God bless the city we love.

Thank you.