



The City of Fitchburg

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2018 State of the City Address

I am honored to stand before you as Mayor of the City of Fitchburg and I am pleased to deliver the 146th State of the City Address. Strength, collaboration, resolve.

One hundred years ago, our city gathered together for the inaugural address of Mayor Frank Foss. With the conclusion of the war to end all wars, Mayor Foss, in his address, paid homage to the united effort of all the people of all countries, specifically efforts made in our home city, to bring victory to all freedom loving people. I cannot help, but draw a correlation of our history one hundred years ago to our history only a month ago.

This winter is proving to be a grueling test with record breaking lows, ice accumulation, and blizzards. Although not a world war, Fitchburg certainly shared its battles against the cold. After a broken steam pipe in Crocker Middle School, Our school department, in less than a week were able to resume instruction at St Anthony Di Padua Elementary School and Thomas C. Passios Elementary School. I wish to express my sincere gratitude to our Superintendent, Andre Ravenelle, support staff, and our teachers for working so tirelessly to ensure the safety and education of our children.

Let us make no mistake, the relocation of 650 students, classrooms, and materials could not be done single handedly. Collaboration from communities outside the Fitchburg district made such an immediate response possible. I would like to thank Lunenburg Public Schools, the Town of Lunenburg, St. Anthony's Parish, Applewild School, Diocese of Worcester, Gardner Public Schools, Leominster Public Schools, and Monty Tech for assisting Fitchburg in its time of need.

It is also important to recognize the accomplishments of our Fire & Police Departments, DPW, The United Way, Salvation Army, and Our Fathers House. With the sub-zero temperatures we have been experiencing, these departments and agencies have been making every effort to ensure members of our community have safe warm places to go, and have the services they need to survive the cold. Thank you all for all that you do.

This past year city departments have worked together to improve our city's future. We have seen new housing units built, road improvements, economic development, we cleaned our neighborhoods, and created incentives for developers to utilize mixed use development in our downtown.

During 2017, 11 properties were taken by the city for seriously delinquent taxes. Interest and fees for these properties totaled nearly \$1 million dollars. The city will work to bring these properties back into productive use either through auction or through our side yard sale program. Within a years' time we have seen a 22% decline in foreclosed properties in Fitchburg. One of the many signs that our housing market is healthy and continues to improve!

Leading by example, the city has appropriated approximately \$600,000 dollars for the demolition of a dozen blighted properties inherited through a tax title process. In order for the private citizenry to be held accountable for their properties, the city must do the same. Along with an aggressive coordinated code enforcement focus on blighted and at – risk neighborhoods, the city is collaborating with partners at NewVue Communities and the Department of Housing and Community Development to roll out a new pilot program focused on rehabbing long abandoned homes. These homes would then be sold as market rate homeownership opportunities.

The collaborative mix of public funds, private investment, and homeownership is the only way to address these issues, and I am proud to report that our enforcement departments and NICE task force have been working tirelessly on your behalf to clean up our neighborhoods.

In September I had the privilege to attend the ribbon cutting for the Fitchburg Yarn Works. This \$37 million dollar project breathes new life into the historic Nockege River Mill Building, formally home to the Fitchburg Yarn Company. With 96 new housing units, hints of historic features and turn of the century architecture throughout, this project certainly speaks to the growing demand for urban loft style apartments, and another example of investment to a rapidly improving housing market.

The city is currently working with Rees-Larkin Development who intends to re-develop three contiguous parcels, two vacant historic buildings and a vacant lot at the intersection of Main and Summer Street. This project will produce 42 units of high-quality mixed-income rental housing and commercial space just one block from the Intermodal Transit Center. This project will be another linchpin in the redevelopment of Moran Square and downtown Fitchburg.

This year, the city was informed that the Moran Square Historic District was certified by the National Park Service to be included in the National Register of Historic Places. In conjunction with Fitchburg State, we are also working to establish the Upper Common Historic District. These certifications are vital in providing developers with financing mechanisms from state and federal programs. This allows for redevelopment in these areas at a cost-effective rate while simultaneously revitalizing our community.

After a year and a half since the fire at B.F. Brown School, the potential to redevelop the building seemed almost impossible. However, with the work of our Solicitor's office, a settlement was reached with our insurance company. These funds, along with historic tax credits, will be used for this restoration, allowing our partners at NewVue Communities to continue the redevelopment of the building. This project will create a total of 55 artist-preference apartments that will strengthen our creative economy, invigorate the art museum, and continue to stabilize the North Main Street neighborhood.

Government red tape is one of the most cumbersome barriers in commercial development. This past year our Solicitors Office, Health Department and Building Department brought reasonable minds together and loosened the red tape. For the first time in this city's history, we established a zoning ordinance welcoming food trucks. In one year, five new local Fitchburg food trucks were established. They provide an enhanced service to our civic events, brewery, and they advertise that Fitchburg is their hometown at events outside of our city.

One of the major complaints my office has received since my administration began, was the city's two year vacancy ordinance on preexisting nonconforming structures. A process that delayed the development of vacant buildings, precluded investment, and made rehabilitation seemingly impossible. This zoning change balances the interest in bringing properties up-to-date, which were not in compliance with zoning bylaws, while simultaneously encouraging rehabilitation and reuse of abandoned and blighted buildings.

For nearly a decade, businesses along Airport Road and a large portion of our downtown have fought to gain access to high-speed internet. When I took office, I made it a top priority to find a permanent solution with regard to the lack of telecommunication infrastructure in key commercial and industrial areas. Current existing conditions in these areas of the city have forced local businesses to endure low internet speeds, which are reliant upon Dial-up, DSL, or in some cases T1 lines. These forms of internet are slow and very expensive to maintain. This situation created a severe obstacle with job creation and job retention. Furthermore, the city's airport serves as a staging area during times of emergency and natural disasters, and was operating without access to high speed internet.

With the strong support of Gov. Baker, Lt. Gov. Polito, and Sec. Jay Ash, the city applied for and was awarded a \$250,000 dollar MassDevelopment Site Readiness Program Grant. These critical funds allowed the city to install the proper infrastructure to bring high-speed fiber to businesses like Mark Freeman, president of Steel-Fab, who in the past had to wait 30 minutes to download files that should only take seconds with today's modern technology. I cannot emphasize enough the importance of the collaborative efforts across the local, state and private sectors to make this project come to fruition.

I'm confident Airport Road will continue to grow economically. This past year we saw the completion of a new state of the art Administration Building at the Fitchburg Airport. I encourage you to visit the building, the aviation school and see the activity there. Due to the airports central location in the state it is a common refueling stop for Massachusetts State Police, Med-flight helicopter units and private planes. Once the expansion of the main runway from 4500 to 5000 ft. is realized, it will not only improve safety, but also allow better access for corporate aircraft. When completed and the smaller crosswind runway closes, there will be nearly 90 acres available for development.

Several new businesses had their ribbon cutting ceremonies this year. Our underworld friends at River Styx Brewing are serving their hand craft brews, it certainly makes all of us proud to read their labels, "Made in Fitchburg." Zapata is serving their Mexican cuisine not only at their brick and mortar, but we also can see their colorful food truck around the city! We also added Mount Wachusett Community College to our main street with their automotive technology program, Slattery's restaurant received a beautiful makeover in their dining room and Aldrich towing built a new commercial building for their towing operations. These are just a handful of examples of new and exciting Fitchburg investments!

This past summer, filming, marketing and production were all happening in Fitchburg! With the help of our friends from the North Central Chamber of Commerce, Fitchburg was competing with large cities across the country and the globe to host The Drone Racing League. Because of our one-of-a-kind architecture and local support, Fitchburg was chosen to host one of the Drone Racing Leagues' World Championship races. This brought in more than 400 people who descended on the area, and a lifetime of people watching Fitchburg as a host community on national television.

Cameras rolled on our historic Main Street for the filming of "Castle Rock," the upcoming high-profile psychological-horror series set in the Stephen King multiverse that weaves a saga of darkness and light, played out in our very own Fay Club.

Fitchburg's home page website now hosts promotional videos about our city and who we are becoming! With the help of local businesses and their sponsorships as well as our Community Development Department, Fitchburg has six beautiful marketing videos sharing all the unique aspects of our great city!

The Worcester Business Journal has cited the importance of taking advantage of the cannabis industry and securing its projected growth in 2018, and Fitchburg has been working diligently to capture that growth. Last year the city signed four host agreements, and recently an additional two. State Licensing, state permitting, and build-out are the largest time consumers before the city will recognize the results of these host agreements. In October, Revolutionary Clinics II gifted the city \$25,000 dollars as a result of a host agreement. These funds will help supplement the costs for repairs to the Oak Hill Road Bridge. An essential bridge that serves as direct access to the Cleghorn neighborhood for our first responders and residents.

In August, Fitchburg and Leominster announced the acquisition of 3.8 miles of rail right of way necessary to construct the Twin Cities Rail Trail. This long desired achievement is the result of years of hard work and collaboration between local, state, and federal officials. In total the Twin Cities Rail Trail will run 4.5 miles between downtown Fitchburg and downtown Leominster providing bike and pedestrian access to jobs and services in both communities, as well our commuter rail station on Main St.

This buzz of development is REAL – Fitchburg is pioneering in new ways to increase our commercial tax base to lessen the burden born collectively by our residents. With the development of Game on Fitchburg, medical marijuana facilities, new solar projects, the former Pelletier Building Supply facility into Grade A commercial space, two new Cumberland Farms and the completion of the Nockeige River Mill complex - Fitchburg is seeing robust investment and an increase in commercial tax dollars. For the first time in decades, developers are ready and willing to invest significant funds in the city of Fitchburg!

In regards to the finances for fiscal year 2018, and with the help and guidance from our City Council, we passed a fiscally conservative budget. The city's general operating budget of \$118 million dollars, confirms the strong working partnerships among our municipal departments, and our ongoing determination to provide Fitchburg residents with the best possible services.

With the continued federal battle of the shrinking of funds for the Community Development Block Grant, I have taken steps to slowly remove city positions off of CDBG funding and incorporate them into the general operating budget. This allows for less dependency on grant funding for city positions while allowing for increased funding towards community development projects.

We added several new critical positions to our workforce, 2 new firefighters were hired through the SAFER Grant, and an additional building inspector. With a rising economy, our building department has seen an influx of permit applications – this new position has helped alleviate the continued inspections of existing commercial buildings while other inspectors handle new construction and renovation. Furthermore the city has contracted out our Animal Control services, lessening our dependency on Other Post-Employment Benefits and operating more efficiently for our citizens.

In addition, our stabilization fund has a strong balance of \$6.1 Million dollars. My commitment is to continue to appropriate available funds into this essential reserve account in order to protect our city from any unforeseen emergencies. The FY18 budget increased our snow and ice accounts, slowly lessening our dependency on available funds to cover these expenses during the winter.

Our very own high school football team set the precedence for our school department this year; success! For the first time since 2008, the football team earned a victory against our sister city. This is not the only record the high

school broke either, last school year they broke its attendance rate and had its highest graduation rate in the school's history. A new program was also created in collaboration with Mount Wachusett Community College – which allows students to participate in a yearlong course to become a certified nursing assistant.

Through our Early Childhood Literacy Initiative, Footsteps 2 Brilliance, Fitchburg students have read 72,000 books and over 4500 hours – our students have one of the most successful results in the Footsteps to brilliance program, closing the vocabulary gap in a data driven and pragmatic way. Our elementary and middle schools have continued to be seen as setting state examples for academic and social emotional practices. They have been placing a heavy focus on pre-AP and advanced learning opportunities in STEM education and preparation for our high schools honors academy.

Two years ago, when I became Mayor, Superintendent Ravenelle, Assistant Superintendent Jokela, the School Committee, and I began the process with the Massachusetts School Building Authority to focus on Crocker Elementary School by analyzing existing conditions, determining its needs, and implementing those results. MSBA is an important tool that allows the city to leverage state resources to build or renovate our schools with an 80% reimbursement. Most recently, our City Council approved a \$1 million dollar loan order to conduct a feasibility study for Crocker Elementary. As part of the Core Grant Program, 80% is reimbursed and the city will be presented with options of renovation, repair, or new construction. This process will take roughly two years to complete and an additional three years for construction.

After suffering a water leak over the holiday break, the School Department, City, and our Insurance Company have been diligently working to bring our students back to the Crocker campus. Again, I cannot thank the students, parents, teachers, staff, and community for their patience, cooperation, and support as we work with the appropriate agencies to remediate the damage. Our primary focus is to continue to ensure that our students and educators are in a safe, healthy environment.

Exactly a year ago this month, the School Department, School Committee, and I submitted to MSBA a 2017 accelerated repair program application to address the roof concerns at Longsjo Middle School. Unfortunately, Fitchburg was not invited to participate in this repair program. The city has taken the proper steps to fully fund the approximate \$2 million dollar project. This past month the School Department conducted a feasibility study of the roof, and last night the city council took their first vote to fully fund the project. City departments will work quickly to make sure this project is completed in a timely and cost effective manner.

Our school department has a total operating budget of \$72 million dollars. This consists of \$49.8 million dollars of Chapter 70 aid from the state and \$22 million dollars from the city. I am also proud to report that the city has exceeded our net school spending requirement.

Last year alone, the city invested additional resources into upgrades in the high school auditorium and renovations to the Memorial Middle School auditorium. There was a retaining wall installed at South Street Elementary School and a new domestic hot water boiler and control ventilations installed at Longsjo Middle School.

With the addition of new police officers in the FY17 budget our Police Department remains hard at work. Our overall Uniformed Crime Report, Part One Crime, shows a decrease of 11% from 2016, and 22% decrease on a three year average. We have the lowest number of reported burglaries year to date and our Drug Suppression Unit, along with the Worcester County Task Force, made 42 arrests, removed ten illegal firearms off the street, and took possession of illegal narcotics.

With the help of Congresswoman Tsongas and the SAFER Grant, our Fire Department will be able to maintain minimum staffing standards of 17 firefighters. The fire department has continued to receive certification in specialized training in order to address unique rescue missions for our citizens. Also, the fire prevention bureau

continues to work with our Building and Health departments to correct fire code deficiencies – a crucial aspect to ensure the safety of all our residents.

Our Department of Public Works has been working around the clock to make improvements throughout our city. In Fiscal Year 18 we received \$1.1 million dollars in Chapter 90 transportation aid from the state, and we also allocated an additional \$200,000 dollars from free cash in order to repair roads.

In a partnership with Fitchburg State, new sidewalks, lighting and paving were installed on Pearl Street. Our Safe Routes to School project, along the South Street corridor, was completed providing us with new sidewalks, traffic signals and street paving. This was a \$1.2 million dollar federally funded initiative by the State Dept. of Transportation. To make a safer intersection, the city designed and constructed a roundabout at Electric Ave. and Rollstone Road using reserved funds from the Bridle Cross condominiums developer, with the balance covered by Chapter 90.

DPW continues to methodically update traffic signals throughout the city by replacing old non-functioning detection loops and installing state-of-the-art cameras at intersections to control traffic flow. We were one of the first communities in the state to be awarded a Small Bridge Grant from MassDOT. The funds from the grant will be used to repair a small bridge on Ashburnham Street. Finally, construction of a new salt shed is slated to begin this summer.

I am proud to say that the Summer Street Project will begin this year. This comprises 3 communities: Fitchburg-Lunenburg-Leominster and involves the Reconstruction of Summer Street and North Street. As State Representative I lobbied for this project and my office was instrumental in securing a \$450,000 dollar earmark in the Transportation Bond Bill.

Our Water Dept. replaced more than two miles of water mains, greatly improving water quality and fire protection for the hundreds of residents living in these areas. Additional upgrades/replacement of old water mains are scheduled to be completed in the spring.

Our friends at the Wastewater Department, otherwise known as the clean water department, completed the Beech Hazel Sewer separation project, which will prevent an annual release of 500,000 gallons of sewage contaminated storm water discharged into the Nashua River. They have initiated the Secondary System Upgrade project at the East plant, which will improve performance capabilities, and help the city achieve permit compliance. For the past several years our Wastewater Department has been working under the conditions of a forced consent decree by direction of the Environmental Protection Agency. I would like to thank this department for the hard work they have been doing to bring our city into compliance, and more importantly improve our sewer system to run satisfactorily, something that we all take for granted.

Our Board of Health has been working with Waste Management on the landfill expansion. Currently, solid waste disposal capacity in the state has been shrinking rapidly. Many communities throughout the commonwealth have to export their waste to other states, costing those ratepayers millions of dollars for trash removal. Preserving our landfill operations is central to keeping our fees affordable, and our community host agreement revenues are essential for municipal functions. The city will be working with our State delegation to file a home rule petition and working on land swaps to place land in conservation necessary to extend the life of our landfill to 2034.

We are thrilled to have a successful \$12.4 million dollar grant application from the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners. This grant will allow our library to renovate the existing structure and provide small group study rooms, an enlarged Youth Library with its own programming space, a teen room, a computer lab for computer training, and more. Fitchburg is one of 24 communities on the waitlist, and our Public Library Trustees have been working enthusiastically to bring this project to fruition.

I'm happy to inform you that the restoration has been completed on our Monument Park cannons and we will have a celebration in the spring. Our Veterans Commissioner, and Joe Firmani from Operation Service, were successful in securing "The Wall that Heals." This scale replica of the Vietnam Veterans memorial will be on display at Crocker Field from July 12 through the 15th, and we are in need of many volunteers.

One week ago, our friends at Fitchburg State University held their theater block opening event. The decision by Fitchburg State to purchase the block was not simply to accommodate their own physical space needs but was also about economic development and partnering with the city in efforts to revitalize downtown. The first phase of the project will include an interdisciplinary IdeaLab that will nurture collaboration among students, faculty, and the community. It will also include a Game Design Studio Lab. Future phases will include restoration of retail storefronts, and the theater itself into a performing arts venue.

As of last evening, I am pleased to share with you that the return of our municipal government to Main Street is well underway! In 2012, our City Hall was listed on the Massachusetts most endangered historic resource list, the potential loss of such a building would have been devastating to not just our downtown, but to the entire city. However, with the help of our community, building committee, department heads, and our city council we have developed a strategic plan to return City Hall from an idea, to a study, to a reality.

This past summer, I brokered a meeting with Bank of America, who in the rise of mobile banking, closed their doors at 700 Main Street. The city grasped this as an opportunity to partner with Bank of America to gift the 1983 building to the city. This provided the needed square footage necessary to bring our municipal offices back to Main Street, and created a cost savings to our taxpayers in the overall city hall restoration project.

The transformative affect between the preservation and buildout of the Theater Block, B.F. Brown and City Hall, is a clear investment in not just the city's past, but also our future. Together, these three projects are nearly \$75 million dollars' worth of economic development in a concentrated area. This development will coincide with our vision of supporting the downtown as a center of governmental and cultural activity and as an area for community and economic development.

There must be an unquestionable commitment among ourselves to advance this city together. These past two years, I believe, we as a city have made more of a commitment to ourselves than ever before. An enthusiastic and contagious commitment that will continue to show in the future development of our city. We are the leaders of ourselves creating our own path and striving for a better tomorrow. To quote Mr. Peter Drucker, the founder of Modern Management, "Unless commitment is made, there are only promises and hopes, not plans."

This evening I want to thank our city staff who have been working tirelessly on your behalf. From the DPW crews maintaining our infrastructure, our public safety personnel keeping us safe, to our clerical support who ensures the customer is served – it is a collaborative effort to make the well-oiled machine that Fitchburg is, work. There is no doubt that the ladies and gentlemen of our city departments have accomplished a job well done. I would also like to thank our boards and commissions, as well as our volunteer groups for their devoted time and effort. A special thank you to FATV and their dedicated staff who made this broadcast possible.

I want to give a sincere thank you to my family. My wife Joanne, my son Marcus and his wife Sara and my grandson, John. My daughter Alexandra and her husband Michael, and my beautiful granddaughter, Rena, for their undying support and pride in this city and in me. Also, I would be remiss if I did not give a special thank you to my staff.

I could not help but notice the parallel in the way Mayor Foss closed his State of the City Address to the current status of our city. He stated, "We have just cause to feel exceedingly proud of the city we represent. In all war

activities and in all movements that tend to the advancement of its people, both intellectually and morally, it has played well its part, and I believe I could close this address with no better words than those of Caroline Atherton Mason, one of Fitchburg's most gifted daughters, who said of her beloved city:

So through the round years, she keeps
Advancing on her past,
Her old time vigor never sleeps,
And even as she sows, she reaps.
God Bless her to the last.”

Fitchburg residents – because of our strength, collaboration, and resolve Fitchburg is making its place as the great city that it always was and always will be.

My fellow citizens, the time to act is now!

Thank you, God Bless this Nation, this Commonwealth, and God Bless the Great City of Fitchburg.