

MAYOR PAUL COOGAN  
CITY OF FALL RIVER- STATE OF THE CITY ADDRESS  
MARCH 14, 2023, 5:30PM

Good evening. Honorable members of the City Council, school committee, members of our legislative delegation, it is an honor to be with you for the 2023 State of the City address.

It is great to see the business owners, department heads, board & commission members, division managers and, of course, our residents, who have joined us here in the City Council chambers or have tuned in from home. Thank you for being a part of the extended Fall River team that works day in and day out to move our City forward.

This team is led by an outstanding group of elected officials. I'd like to recognize our City Council and our School Committee, who are here with us today. I also want to recognize:

Our partners in State Government are here. I thank them for all their hard work in Boston- Senator Michael Rodrigues and Representatives Carole Fiola, Alan Silvia and Paul Schmid.

I'd like to thank the Baker-Polito administration, who will be missed in Fall River. It has been a terrific first few months with the new team of Governor Maura Healey and Lt. Governor Kim Driscoll. There is no doubt that they will continue to support the amazing partnership we have with the State.

In Washington, we have a tremendous group of advocates in Senator Elizabeth Warren, Senator Ed Markey and Congressman Jake Auchincloss.

I must take a moment to thank my wife Judi, all my supporters, and my family for their love and support. They keep me energized and keep me grounded.

Of course, I must thank our City employees, who work hard day in and day out to serve our residents and prepare this city for our future. There are a number of Department Heads here, who work together to make Fall River a better place.

I want to acknowledge Police Chief Paul Gauvin, Fire Chief Roger St Martin, EMS Director Tim Oliveira and EMA Director Rick Aguiar- who keep our community safe, healthy and protected.

I'd like to introduce some new faces in Fall River- as we have filled some key positions in the last year.

- Bridget Almon, our new CFO
- Kara Humm, our ARPA Coordinator
- Al Oliveira, in a new role overseeing facilities and public works
- Dan Lane, City Assessor
- Sedryk Sousa, Assistant Auditor
- Jasmine Pereira, Grant Writer

And only a few weeks ago, we hired a new Veterans Services Officer, Michelle Hamilton. I look forward to working with her to improve the quality of life for the residents who fought for our country. I want to take a quick moment tonight to acknowledge and thank our veterans, who have made it possible for us to be here today.

With these new faces and our existing leadership, we are focused on improving the culture and service within Government Center. We have entered a new era in Fall River, one of energy, hope and unprecedented growth. It has taken a lot of time and effort for Fall

River to get where we are today, and I am honored to serve as Mayor during this important time in history.

The job of the mayor, City Council and members of City administration is to balance the pressing problems of today while still setting a foundation for the future. I'd like to take time tonight to discuss the challenges, solutions, plans and trends that define our City.

Starting with FINANCE:

- Like all communities and households, we are grappling with inflation. The cost of materials and services has risen- with it, our operating costs.
- As we deal with staffing shortages across City departments, public safety agencies and the school department, we have had to increase wages and salaries to reflect the cost of living and to attract and retain talent.
- The goal of our administration is to try to keep the financial burden off of our residents.
- Fortunately, the City is in a stronger financial position than we have been in years.
- We currently have over \$8.5 million in our stabilization fund with another \$2.6 million available in free cash.
- We also have a large portion of ARPA funds remaining.

ARPA funds have given us the ability to invest in much needed capital improvement projects without using funds from our budget.

These include:

- Infrastructure projects, large and small
- Upgrades to our parks, trails and green spaces

- Graffiti removal machines
- A new website and software upgrades to improve City services

And so many more. A full list of all of our ARPA allocations can be found on the City's website.

These projects represent important, one time investments that will improve the health, safety and quality of life for our residents for years to come.

- Beyond ARPA funds, which will not be around forever, we still have reason to be positive about revenue growth in the future.
- Our administration is also constantly seeking ways to cut costs and identify revenue sources.

However, these projections about the future mean little to residents who are feeling the impact of our new tax obligations and the rising cost of living RIGHT NOW- especially as education costs crowd our budget.

- Although we appreciate the new education funding we receive from the state through the Student Opportunity Act, it has triggered an increase in our Net School Spending obligation. Fall River is in a unique position, as we experience this increase at the same time that our contributions to the new Diman and Durfee high schools come onto our tax roll.
- When you combine the growing size of net school spending and our payments for two new high schools, the rest of our budget- for public safety, or other City services- gets tighter and tighter.

As a solution, my administration is planning to submit a home rule petition (with Council approval) to the State legislature, asking for a change in how they calculate our net school spending.

- Each City and Town's contribution to education is mandated by law, but our required contribution does not take into consideration the millions of dollars that we pay for school transportation or payments to school bonds- like those for Diman and Durfee.
- If our petition passes, we can expect to free up close to \$11 million, which will offset the bonds for Diman and Durfee.
- However, this petition may take time, and residents need financial relief **now**. That is why we are announcing today that, for the second year in a row, we will use a portion of our ARPA Lost Revenue funding to cut this year's Durfee High School contribution in half- which will provide a bit of relief to our taxpayers.

At the end of the day, despite the strain on our budget, we have an unprecedented amount of funding being provided to our schools.

- Within the Fall River School Department, we have faced some of the same challenges as most of the schools across the country- especially when it comes to staffing and recruitment.
- Another major hurdle has been getting students caught up academically while balancing the social and emotional impact of COVID-19 on students.
- Still, our educators have been doing a tremendous job getting our students back on track.
- We have added dozens of new positions to meet the mental health, social and emotional needs of our kids, with more to come.
- We have been aggressive with recruitment efforts to fill both new and existing positions.

- And we have also grown our partnership with UMass Dartmouth to help over 100 young teachers get their Masters degree. This has been a fantastic tool to grow talent within the district.
- In the near future, the School Department is looking to rapidly expand Pre-K in the City, meeting a major need in our community.

Moving on to PUBLIC SAFETY, which we know is a top priority for our residents.

Similar to our school department, recruitment has been a major struggle for our public safety agencies- especially our police force.

- Officers have done a tremendous job these last few years under difficult conditions. However, our goal is to fill the Department's vacancies so officers have the support and manpower they need.
- We have invested in creative solutions to meet this goal.
- The Fall River Police Department launched an initiative to provide loans to those entering the police academy. The City agrees to pay the upfront costs for equipment, and will forgive that loan once the recruit serves 5 years in Fall River. This way, we can eliminate one hurdle to joining the force and retain new recruits for years to come.
- We also negotiated a new contract with our police, putting our salaries on par with other communities. The Fall River EMS division also saw an increase in pay. This has been an important measure to address our staffing issues.
- Our Fire Department also has ten new recruits set to enter the academy soon.

- All branches of public safety- Police, Fire, EMS and EMA- have worked through periods of financial strain and have made due with limited or outdated equipment.
- That is why we have made long overdue investments in technology, vehicles and training for all of our public safety agencies. These include new medical rescue vehicles, improvements to our 9-1-1 dispatch system, police cars and so much more.
- We have purchased a new ladder truck, a new pumper, turnout gear and breathing apparatus for our Fire Department, and have refurbished 3 other pieces of equipment.
- ARPA funds have also been used to purchase body cameras and the software needed to run them. The body camera program is expected to be rolled out by summer and we hope that it will increase trust and transparency between the Police Department and the public.

Over the last few years, our public safety agencies have become key players in our efforts to address issues of mental health, substance abuse and homelessness.

- Like communities across the country, we have seen an increase in our homeless population AND in the need for substance abuse prevention and treatment.
- The First Step Inn and the Timao Center (our overflow shelter), sadly, have been very busy this winter, but we have been fortunate to have 37 extra beds this year to accommodate the demand.
- As we see a rising need for services, we will be opening the City's first Homeless Drop-In Center, where individuals can

access the support they need- whether its assistance with housing, employment or mental healthcare.

- With CDA funding, we have purchased new outreach vans and two other trailers- one with bathrooms and showers, and another with a mobile washer and dryer.
- Through a federal grant, we have a 6 person team called the FAST team. This group, which is integrated with the Police Department and includes an FRPD officer, works around the clock to connect people with the services they need
- Fall River has also received a large pot of money from national opioid settlements, and we are working with a consultant to inventory our current services and make long term plans on how to use these funds.

In the middle of a national housing crisis, we hear all the time from residents about the rising cost of rent in Fall River.

- We are looking to create a new facility with single room occupancies and supportive services for some residents.
- We are starting a new initiative called the “Moving On” program with the Fall River Housing Authority, which will help those living in public housing transition out. This not only helps residents improve their quality of life, but it frees up units that are in high demand.
- With our Community Development Agency, we have worked to expand affordable housing in Fall River. We have created 23 affordable units across the City and have two projects in the works that will bring a combined total of 40 more on board.

In the middle of a housing crisis, bringing any new or renovated units into the housing market a top high priority. One major goal of my administration has always been to support the private rehabilitation of



our housing stock. This gets properties back on our tax rolls, it eliminates the safety risks and eyesores of abandoned properties, and it helps meet the demand for housing.

- Long abandoned school renovations are being undertaken- Lincoln School, Notre Dame and two former Atlantis Charter buildings
- We are also seeing growth in single family home construction, and duplex or townhouse style developments- which balances our housing market and accommodates the needs of our residents

Interest and investment in Fall River is not limited to housing. Fall River has gained a reputation as an affordable, welcoming choice for companies large and small.

- Our main struggle when it comes to supporting industry in Fall River is- in one word- space!
- Our 3 business parks in the North end of the City have an occupancy rate exceeding 95%.
- Large projects are in the work to help meet this demand.
- For example, 20 acres of land was recently purchased to build the new “Campus at Innovation Way” which will create 950,000 square feet of space.
- This project alone is expected to bring in hundreds of new jobs, adding to the 6,000 plus jobs already in that area of Fall River.
- Offshore wind is another industry that is set to expand in Fall River. The Southcoast Wind project is set to create over 250 full time jobs, and we can expect more growth down the line.
- Many of Fall River’s past struggles were partially because of our reliance on the textile industry. We didn’t have the diversity or

flexibility to pivot once manufacturing jobs moved. Today, we have so many different industries and employers expanding in Fall River- distribution, manufacturing, biomedical science, cold storage, and much more.

- Fall River's unemployment rate as of December 2022 was 5.6%- compared to 7.3% just a year before. This is a 20% decrease in unemployment. Ten years ago, our unemployment rate was 10.6% - around twice as high as it is today.

Of course, to support Fall River's growth and to improve the quality of life for our residents, we must invest in long needed infrastructure and capital improvement projects.

- The City certainly has a hefty to-do list, with many streets, sidewalks, parks and water mains in need of repair.
- Funding is a constant challenge for these large projects. We utilize all kinds of funding- like our annual Chapter 90 funds from the state or grants- to get these projects done. We also strategize with our utility partners- like Liberty Utilities and our own Water Department- to coordinate efforts and save money.
- The City is slated for another busy construction season when it comes to streets and sidewalks. I hope you all agree with me that while the temporary detours are a hassle, they are well worth it.
- Some of the construction you see may be repairs to our water infrastructure- like mains and lead services. A combination of ARPA funds and grant money have resulted in around \$25 million towards water infrastructure in the coming years.

- We invested over \$1 million of ARPA funds for tree plantings and stump removals, which will complement the work on our streets and sidewalks.
- The City has purchased two new street sweepers with ARPA funds and we will be expanding our residential street sweeping program this Spring.
- We are also in the midst of a multimillion dollar campaign to repair and upgrade City Parks. From 2020 to 2022, we have invested over \$3 million dollars in our parks, with a little under \$8 million committed for ongoing and future projects.
- New, relaxed ARPA regulations were recently announced, freeing up even more money for infrastructure.

Of course, one area in particular is seeing unprecedented investment in infrastructure.

After decades of work, Fall River's waterfront is about to undergo a major transformation. The two most important features of this revitalization are well underway- Route 79 and SouthCoast Rail.

- High speed rail will be fully operational by the end of the year and will re-establish the commuter rail from Fall River to Boston for the first time since '59.
- The \$135 Million Dollar Route 79 Project has broken ground and will be completed in 2026.
- This will result in 19 acres of space along Fall River's waterfront, which will be used for things like mixed-use housing, restaurants, coffee shops, office space, retail and recreation.
- The Route 79 project is expected to bring in over \$600 million in private investment and generate hundreds of thousands of dollars in new tax revenue for the city.

Of course, the main challenge that comes with a project like Route 79 and future development is meeting the need for parking.

- We are working with MassDOT and other partners to identify temporary lots that can be used this summer while we adapt to the new traffic patterns.
- We've had a slight change to our plans to relocate the State's salt sheds under the Braga Bridge to open up space for parking. Now, we will combine City and State property *next to* the Sheds to create 200 permanent and seasonal off street parking spots. We plan to add a pedestrian walkway that connects nearby attractions.

We also hope to expand parking and create new commercial or recreational space at the former Liberty Utilities complex on Anawan Street. Significant remediation work is finally coming to an end, and the Redevelopment Authority expects to close on the property in August.

The waterfront is home to some of our many attractions and is destined to be a hub for visitors and residents alike. While there is a need to uplift all of the great things that Fall River has to offer, we have a long way to go before we can be considered a true travel destination, and we need to be thoughtful about how to invest in tourism.

- Using ARPA funds, the City has formalized a partnership with local organization Viva Fall River to complete a two-year tourism "pilot program" of sorts.
- UMass Dartmouth's Charlton School of Business has assembled a team of consultants to conduct a tourism study- something that, to my knowledge, has never been done in our City.

- This study will help us set up a baseline and goals for the future- which can be used if and when the City hires an in-house tourism director.
  - We are also looking to lease or purchase trolleys so that they can be used for future tourism projects and events.
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As you can see, we share many challenges with the rest of the nation- like the rising cost of living and staffing shortages.

We also have a number of unique advantages- like an explosion of private interest in housing or industrial space, and a number of transformative infrastructure projects in the works.

In between the major projects and trends I spoke about tonight, there are small challenges and victories that I simply do not have time to talk about.

Whether it's:

- Correcting traffic patterns at Durfee, Atlantis and Letourneau schools
- Pursuing a revitalization plan in the Pleasant Street area  
OR
- Continuing to work with developers on the Bank Street Armory and the former Police Station

...we work every single day on issues like these with the unified goal of moving our city forward.

I love my job as mayor. I love the daily challenges. I love the residents, and I love this great City. Together, we will continue to work towards what I know is a very bright future for the City of Fall River.

Thank you, and may God bless Fall River.