

State of the City 2022

Remarks of Mayor Noam Bramson

Hello, friends and neighbors, and thank you for tuning in to this unconventional State of the City Address.

It's not a good idea just yet for us to gather in a big crowd at City Hall for a traditional speech, so instead, I am recording this message to report to you on the opportunities and challenges confronting New Rochelle, and on the progress we have made together as a community.

As you know, that progress has been achieved in the face of a global emergency. Many are grieving painful losses, many more have suffered through illness, and all of us are exhausted by a pandemic that has dragged on for two long years.

So I want to begin by thanking those on the frontline. Our doctors, nurses, and health care workers. Our First Responders. Our child care and social service providers. Our team here at City Hall. Everyone who worked an essential job at risk to themselves, and helped us see our way through.

New Rochelle will always have the distinction of being the first place in America to confront a community outbreak of COVID, a difficult experience we can never forget and yet also a source of pride that our city, ahead of others, came together and rose to this challenge, earning the right to call ourselves New Ro Strong.

The pandemic isn't quite over – new variants could emerge, and the medically vulnerable must still be afforded special consideration – but with a significant majority vaccinated, the receding Omicron wave leaving behind a measure of natural immunity, and effective

tools to prevent serious illness widely available, for most of us, a new normal is almost here, in which COVID simply becomes background noise, no longer an acute crisis, and instead a risk that we accept and manage like many other risks, without excessive disruption to our lives. This may be the closest thing to an “end” that is realistically attainable.

And while it hurts too much to celebrate, we do have a chance now to look ahead to better things.

Because even through the worst of the pandemic, New Rochelle kept making big strides on the essential priorities that will shape our future. When it comes to our economy and our budget, our environment and our neighborhoods, and our commitment to the dignity and worth of all people, this city – our city – is poised to emerge from the crisis with fresh momentum, and a renewed sense of possibility and optimism.

Let’s start with economic development, which has been such a key focus of New Rochelle’s attention for two generations and which impacts so many other priorities. Because New Rochelle’s downtown is exactly the kind of place – walkable, transit-served, and highly-diverse – where growth makes the most sense and does the most good, for everyone.

Today, you can literally see a new and healthier city taking shape. Thirty-two significant projects have been approved in the last six years. Eight are now completed and leasing up ahead of schedule. Twelve are under construction right now. And more will begin soon. A wave of investment and vitality New Rochelle has not seen in a century.

And this past year, the City Council took unanimous, bipartisan action to build on this great progress, with a comprehensive update to our Downtown Overlay Zone that includes stronger environmental requirements and additional provisions for housing to meet surging demand. Those updates arrive alongside parallel efforts to expand affordability, enhance opportunities for training and employment, and build capacity among minority and women-owned businesses.

New density from the second floor up will eventually bring greater commercial energy to the street level as the buying power of thousands of customers supports and attracts legacy and new businesses alike. And to accelerate this natural process, the City is launching a Retail Task Force that brings together big developers with small entrepreneurs to look at everything from how we fit out space, to how we incubate creative enterprises, to how we right-size our parking, even as we make downtown less car-dependent and more walkable.

Meanwhile, just to the east of the downtown, we approved new zoning to unlock the great potential of the Echo Bay waterfront. With our public works center finally moved to Nardozzi Place, it's all-systems-go for the restoration of the shoreline on East Main Street, with homes and shops, a restored Armory, and waterfront parkland that will allow all of us to enjoy this stretch of Long Island Sound for the first time in our lives.

And just to the north of the downtown, we're designing the LINC, a truly transformative project that will repurpose much of Memorial Highway into a linear park, connecting the Lincoln Avenue neighborhood to transportation and employment centers, and creating a fantastic new open space amenity for the tens of thousands of people who live nearby.

The LINC isn't just a local priority. We've received nearly \$20 million in highly-competitive State and federal grants to make this vision a reality, a credit to the excellent advocacy of our representatives in Washington and Albany, who recognize a special opportunity to bind together neighborhoods, advance environmental justice, and foster economic opportunity. With lots of community input, we'll complete design of the LINC later this year, and then begin construction in 2023.

Through these efforts and more, on every front, New Rochelle is leaning in to the principles of environmental and social governance, pursuing growth that is sustainable and equitable. It's the right thing to do for our community and for our world, and it makes New Rochelle even more attractive to mission-oriented investors. I couldn't be more proud of all we've done to get here, and I want to thank our talented planning and development team for the terrific work that has made New Rochelle a national model.

I also want to thank the downtown residents and business owners who have endured difficult growing pains with patience and understanding. Construction everywhere, road closures, utility work – it's a lot to deal with. Please know that the City will continue doing everything we can to minimize disruption, and be sure that the inconvenience today will pay off tomorrow, because it all adds up to a better, healthier, more exciting city of which all of us can be proud.

Now, I've started with the downtown, because it's health is so critical to New Rochelle as a whole – to our tax base and property values, to job opportunities and our civic image. But, of course, our commitments and priorities aren't confined to one area, no matter how important; they extend the length and breadth of our city.

So let's talk about some of the other issues that impact every neighborhood, starting with the environment.

- We're completing a full refresh of GreeNR, our award-winning sustainability plan that's now about a decade old, and needs an update to account for past progress and new opportunities.
- We became the largest community in New York to adopt the Stretch Energy Code, which will promote efficiency in our buildings for years to come.
- We're partnering with Sustainable Westchester to transition from gas-powered to electric-powered landscaping equipment, which will mean better air quality, fewer emissions, and quieter neighborhoods.
- We're proud to be part of Westchester Power, which has delivered clean energy to tens of thousands of customers in New Rochelle, doing our part for a healthier world.
- And we're utilizing a portion of our American Rescue Plan grant to design a green infrastructure network, emphasizing nature, open space, and clean air and water, especially in areas that have historically borne the brunt of pollution and are most vulnerable to climate change.

When it comes to our fiscal management, I can report to every taxpayer and every recipient of municipal services that New Rochelle's finances are in good shape, with a robust fund balance and excellent bond rating, and with new development increasing revenue year by year for both the City and School District.

Our fiscal health, along with the retirement of some old debt, has made possible unprecedented investments in infrastructure,

delivering better value for taxpayers today and ensuring – in the most literal sense – that our future rests on a solid foundation.

That extends from the basics, like significant increases in road maintenance and paving, to improvements at parks and playing fields throughout New Rochelle, to modernization of our aging underground sanitary systems, to attention for long-neglected natural spaces like Beechmont Lake, to the repair of essential community facilities like our fire stations and the Mascaro Boys and Girls Club.

As we rebuild our roads, we're also rethinking them, applying a "complete streets" philosophy that's safer, more attractive, and more welcoming to pedestrians and cyclists.

And our capital plan also includes a comprehensive storm-water analysis to identify the causes of and potential solutions to the chronic flooding that impacts too many neighborhoods, especially as a changing climate increases the frequency and severity of storms.

These investments in infrastructure are paired with equally important investments in everyday services. Expanding Police presence, response capacity, and community engagement, adding personnel to each shift in the Fire Department, giving our DPW crews the equipment they need to keep our streets clean and safe, and helping our Parks team maintain hundreds of acres of public land.

Finally, we are committed – all of us – to strengthening New Rochelle's social fabric, making certain that wherever you come from and whoever you are, you have a valued role in our community.

- To elevate and center voices that have been historically marginalized, we've established advisory committees to advocate for African-American, Hispanic, immigrant, and LGBTQ residents.
- To build capacity among the not-for-profit organizations that deliver life-sustaining services to individuals and families in need, we are using American Rescue Plan funds to extend unprecedented financial support.
- To give youngsters the best possible opportunity for positive experiences, we are building a brand new Remington Boys and Girls Club, sponsoring afterschool activities, providing summer jobs, and creating a new community center at New Roc, while also strengthening our partnership with New Rochelle's School District and our new Superintendent.
- To help more families buy their first home and begin to build generational wealth, we are expanding our homeownership assistance program.
- And to help reduce youth violence, we are working alongside the City Court to offer individualized mentorship for justice-involved young people, while exploring new options to interrupt violence with credible messengers.

Indeed, as communities across America work to build greater trust and accountability between Police and the people they serve, we've created a Community-Police Partnership Board to foster collaborative discussion, improve training protocols, implement our new body camera policy, and promote transparency.

And even as our Police work effectively to confiscate illegal guns, we will continue advocating strongly for national action to keep guns

out of the wrong hands, a priority given added urgency, as we grieve the awful tragedy of a youth on youth shooting just last month.

The truth is all of us have a part to play in making New Rochelle a better city, so to tap the energy and talents of volunteers and forge stronger bonds with service agencies, we created a new position at City Hall – Director of Community Engagement – that was instrumental in guiding our local pandemic response through programs like NourishALL, and is now coordinating efforts toward recovery. If you want to pitch in, visit newrochelleny.com/newrostrong – there are countless ways to make a difference.

I could add so much more. I haven't even touched on the great work of our artists, the vital role of our library, the preservation of our history. I didn't talk about big regional initiatives like Penn Access or big local initiatives like the Ward Acres and Hudson Park master plans. I hardly mentioned valued partners at local colleges and in communities of faith, and the countless other activities, institutions, and causes without which New Rochelle would be a far different and much lesser city. All deserve recognition and only the need for brevity holds me back.

But I cannot close without expressing my thanks to colleagues in government and community leaders throughout New Rochelle.

Everything we accomplish in City Hall is the product of teamwork. A City Administration composed of dedicated professionals. And a City Council that reflects the diverse perspectives and experiences of New Rochelle. I feel very fortunate to work alongside Martha Lopez, Al Tarantino, Yadira Ramos-Herbert, Ivar Hyden, Sara Kaye, and Liz Fried, each of whom brings a distinct focus to New Rochelle's policy-making, a fierce determination to advocate for their constituents,

and a spirit of civility and collaboration that is needed in public life more than ever. Thanks to them, and thanks to you, the state of our city is strong.

May we draw satisfaction from our successful work together, and look with confidence to the even brighter future ahead.

Thank you for listening, and may God bless our community of New Rochelle.