

## **2019 SOTC – Hartford, CT; 03/11/2019**

### **Introduction: Making a Way**

Council President Thames, members of the Court of Common Council, Treasurer Cloud, Town Clerk Bazzano, members of our delegation to the General Assembly, Superintendent Torres-Rodriguez, public servants in every department, residents of the City of Hartford: Good evening.

It is an honor to serve with you, and for you

Thanks to the partnerships we've built together, the State of our City is stronger than it has been in decades, but we have much more work to do.

Three years ago, I stood in this chamber and described our budget crisis. And I will never forget what it felt like to stand here and tell the full reality about where we were.

It's easy to forget just how dangerous that crisis was. It was not clear then that there was any path other than bankruptcy that would allow our city to avoid a catastrophic collapse of services. We were direct and honest about what we faced. We prepared for all possibilities. And where there seemed to be no way, we made a way.

We made a plan, and we've stuck to that plan. And because of that, we're on track to finish this year not only on budget, but able to set money aside to fund vital future capital investments and begin rebuilding our reserves.

And while we got our house in order, we kept key promises, like rebuilding our police and fire departments. With the class that starts this month, we will have hired over one hundred police officers, half of whom are Black or Hispanic. In our Fire Department, we hired one hundred twenty-five new firefighters, more than two-thirds of whom are Black or Hispanic.

Here's the simple story of our last three years: We inherited an insolvent city. For the first time in decades, we did not raise taxes. We did not accumulate debt. We protected services. We staffed our public safety teams. We laid a foundation that should have been laid long ago. And as we said we would, we have begun moving from stability to strength.

Tonight, I want to talk a little more about what strength means for Hartford. And about what challenges we have to tackle next.

What does strength mean? It means economic development citywide. It means a renewed focus on quality of life issues that matter in every neighborhood. And it means tackling persistent, complicated challenges like youth homelessness, youth violence, and chronic absenteeism with the same directness and boldness that we brought to our fiscal crisis.

### **Economic Development**

Let's start with economic development. Today, we're seeing interest from investors who not too long ago would never have invested in Hartford.

We can't be a successful city without a vibrant core. We all should cheer the renovation of empty buildings, like the ones at Pearl and Trumbull — or the development of long-vacant lots, like the ones at Park and Main, which this Council will vote on tonight.

And we all should recognize the power of our rapidly growing innovation ecosystem. It didn't exist two years ago. Today, it includes an insurtech accelerator, an advanced manufacturing accelerator, Stanley Black & Decker's innovation team, Upward Hartford, reSet, Makerspace CT, Infosys, Nassau Re-Imagine, Think Synergy, and soon a digital health accelerator.

That momentum in building an innovation ecosystem may be the difference between a Hartford whose economy is stuck in the past, and a Hartford that plays a major part in the economic and industrial transformations of the 21st century.

But we also cannot be a successful city without strong neighborhoods. And if you look around Hartford today, you'll see more neighborhood economic development than at any time in recent memory.

In North Hartford, projects that had been stalled for decades are underway — the Albany Avenue Streetscape, Bowles Park, Westbrook Village, Weaver High School. Those projects sat on the shelf for years. We're getting them done. And we're reinforcing those efforts with more — the renovation of Martin Luther King school, a historic housing rehab at Albany and Vine, turning

the blighted substation lot on Albany and Magnolia into a community park, and renovating the former Quirk Middle School as a community asset.

The Swift Factory renovation is underway at Five Corners, and will create jobs in the heart of the 06120. Planning is underway for a streetscape project on North Main.

In Frog Hollow and in Parkville, Capitol Avenue is now home to ice cream shops and coffee shops, the site of the Lyric theater will soon be a new Library Branch, the Parkville Market will feature dozens of local food vendors, and planning is underway to launch an ambitious transit oriented development on Bartholomew Avenue. By Pope Park, Mutual Housing is turning vacant, blighted land into high quality affordable housing.

In the Sheldon/Charter Oak neighborhood, the final phase of the Colt Armory complex is underway, Dillon stadium will soon host both community sports leagues and professional soccer, not to mention the Turkey Day game, and a new Boys and Girls Club will rise behind Burr School. Taken together, that's the model of neighborhood development, benefitting our entire community.

We partnered together with Treasurer Cloud to finally make use of the Parks Trust Fund and invest in our beautiful parks — from a new ballpark in Pope to new fields in Colt, pond dredging and a new irrigation system in Goodwin, and playgrounds in Bushnell, Pope, Rocky Ridge and Keney, and more.

Anyone who says that neighborhood economic development hasn't been a priority just isn't paying attention or isn't telling the truth. There will always be those who see advantage in creating division. But in a city our size, we can't afford to be divided. We're one Hartford. We need to celebrate progress everywhere it happens in our city and keep working together for more.

And there's much more progress we need to make. We're seeing more neighborhood investment than we have in a long time, but we have neighborhoods that have suffered from generations of disinvestment and neglect.

That neglect takes many forms, and we've seen some of the most outrageous neglect of all in housing subsidized by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development or HUD.

In Hartford and around the country, the federal government has allowed predatory slumlords to enrich themselves with taxpayer dollars. I've walked with residents through dozens of these units, with windows that won't close and showers where you can see through the ceiling to the bathroom above. With children suffering from painful skin disease because of the mold — mold that the landlords paint over when they get complaints.

Our residents working with the Christian Activities Council raised their voices and won vouchers to secure better housing, but more than that: their activism has forced HUD and Secretary Carson personally to confront the failures of its inspection regime nationwide.

We will continue to work side by side with residents and with the Christian Activities Council. We will continue to be aggressive in our inspections. We will use every tool we have to hold both HUD and landlords accountable for fulfilling their basic responsibility of providing safe, healthy, quality housing.

And we will fight to make sure that those buildings don't sit vacant and deteriorating, but that they're either renovated in a way that respects our community or demolished to make way for something new.

### **Quality of Life**

As much as we've focused on getting buildings built and renovated, the strength of our neighborhoods depends just as much on basic, everyday quality of life. And here, the truth is that our record is mixed. In some areas, we've made real progress. In others, we have to do much better.

We've made it a priority to tackle blight, and our blight remediation team has gotten us on pace to get one hundred properties fixed up every year – and we want to do more, faster now that our land bank is set to begin work this summer. In a few weeks, we will conduct the first tax deed sale of unoccupied properties in years — helping to get those properties into new, productive hands.

Through our Police Department's creative enforcement and awareness efforts, we made a big dent last year in the number of ATVs and dirt bikes on our streets and parks. We'll work to sustain that progress this year.

On illegal dumping, we've used cameras and partnered with residents, and we've made multiple arrests. We are working a number of other cases right now. The message is clear: if you dump on Hartford, get ready to get arrested and prosecuted.

And on snow plowing, I don't know about you, but I think our Department of Public Works has done a great job. They've plowed curb to curb. They've cleared quickly.

It wasn't long ago that Hartford was constantly, year after year, the butt of jokes about how we couldn't clear snow. Winter may not be over yet so I'll still knock on wood, but I'm proud of the work our team has done.

We still have to do more to make sure property owners are clearing their sidewalks, and tonight we are submitting an ordinance change that gives our DPW team power to enforce our sidewalk clearing rules.

With the winter winding down, our team will turn their attention to the potholes that proliferated this winter, here and everywhere. We know there's a lot, we know they're big, and we're going to do our best to get them fixed.

Like many cities, we've seen an increase in the number of rodents. There's a lot of reasons for it, from climate to construction. But here we have to do more. This spring we'll be launching a public awareness and action campaign. We're hiring additional rodent inspectors now, so we can be ready when the weather gets warm.

There are two other areas where we've fallen short. These aren't new problems, but that doesn't matter. We need to make more progress.

The first is bulky waste. Bulky waste has been a problem for a long time. And since Sara and I moved to Hartford thirteen years ago, it never seemed to get better. Last summer, we decided to try something new.

We can't be afraid to experiment and try new things in government. But we also can't be afraid to say when an experiment doesn't work, and ours didn't. We didn't communicate it well, and it caused confusion – and I take responsibility for that.

We changed course, and right now, we're picking up bulky waste wherever we see it. But we're also still knocking on doors and reminding people about the new, more efficient appointment system. We're getting more and more appointments, and we've gotten great feedback from those who've scheduled pickups – it's easy, and it gets done on time.

We ask all of you to help us by reporting bulky waste any time you see it — and you can do it in just a few seconds on the 311 app. And here's our pledge to you: when you report bulky waste to us, we will get it removed within three business days.

The second area where we are determined to do better is litter. This summer, we plan to kick off an anti-litter campaign — partnering with NRZs, with schools, with our Youth Service Corps, and with anyone who's willing. It will only work if we all come together and hold each other — friends, family, customers and strangers alike — to a different set of expectations about how we treat this city that we all love.

In the year ahead, we're going to focus relentlessly on those basic quality of life issues. There's no such thing as “small stuff.” It all matters.

### **Supporting One Another**

Moving our city toward true strength means making sure that we're creating paths to opportunity, caring for one another in times of greatest need and, most of all, working to help the young people in our community build the lives they want to live.

We said we'd open a Reentry Welcome Center right here in City Hall, and we did. It's served over two hundred fifty individuals in just six months.

We said we'd build a Youth Service Corps, and we did. Now in its third year, the Youth Service Corps has created part-time, year-round job opportunities, coaching, and mentoring for nearly six hundred young people in Hartford — and its helped many of those corps members find full time employment or move forward with their education.

This summer, one hundred more young people in our city will have the chance to work with President Obama's foundation as part of the Community Leadership Corps — launched in only two places this year, Chicago and Hartford.

We have so many dedicated and engaged young people in our city, and if that describes you, apply. The Obama Foundation's Community Leadership Corps will help you build the tools to make a big impact here in Hartford and beyond.

All of those initiatives are important. And we've done more than that, like partnering with UTC CEO Greg Hayes and his wife Renata to provide free meals to students over the Winter break, and partnering with CT Transit to open a pop up warming bus during the coldest days in January.

But tonight I want to talk with you about three areas where we're already working quietly but intensely, and where we are determined to do more — youth homelessness, youth violence intervention, and chronic absenteeism.

These are hard problems. But we don't shy away from hard problems.

### **Youth Homelessness**

Over the past few years, we've made progress as a city and as a region in combatting chronic homelessness. The Coordinated Access Network, with Journey Home at the center, has made a difference, reducing chronic homelessness by almost 70% in our region since 2015.

As a City we've worked in creative ways to help. We prioritized Hartford's housing vouchers for chronically homeless individuals and families — something that had never been done before. Because of that initiative alone, we have helped to house nearly two hundred individuals and families.

We will continue our effort to combat homelessness across the board, but our most intense focus this year is on combatting youth homelessness.

In this city, in one of the most affluent regions in the entire world, hundreds of children go to our schools every day, concerned about where they're going to sleep at night.

Late last year, I was proud to kick off a comprehensive campaign to combat youth homelessness with the Greater Hartford Youth Engagement Team Initiative, or YETI, a coalition of social service agencies, government agencies, and other stakeholders aiming to make youth homelessness rare, brief, and nonrecurring.

The YETI was awarded \$1.5 million to create a Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program, and today, that program is giving homeless youth and young adults crisis housing, navigation services, transportation, and rapid re-housing assistance, thanks to organizations like Journey Home, The Connection, The Salvation Army, the Community Renewal Team, and many more. We've secured vouchers under the federal Family Unification Program, to help us house families with children at risk of being separated because of homelessness — as well as young people formerly in the foster care system. We were awarded eighty-three of those vouchers, one of the largest allocations nationwide – more vouchers than cities like New York City and Pittsburgh received.

And in April, when our Coordinated Access Network launches a regional 100 Day Challenge to reduce youth homelessness, we want Hartford to lead the way.

### **Youth Violence Intervention Program**

When a young person is homeless, we too often don't hear about it. When a young person is shot, we do. But our city — not just city government, but our community collectively — has not always responded the way we need to. And the most awful verification of that fact is this: one of the best predictors of whether a young person is going to shoot someone or be shot is whether they've been shot before.



On May 26<sup>th</sup> last year, I got the call that an eleven-year-old boy had been shot in the arm at one o'clock in the morning. He was taken to the hospital, and he was eventually released because, thank God, he didn't suffer a life-threatening injury.

Later that day, I went to visit him at his apartment. As I was waiting outside, I saw a little boy, not much older than my oldest daughter, walking up the street alone with his arm in a cast. I asked him if he was the young man I'd been looking for. The answer was yes. I spent that morning talking with him and his family, and I asked my team to stay connected to this young man to make sure he was getting the support he needed.

For my administration, this child's experience became both an illustration of what was lacking and a call to action. The problem wasn't the lack of organizations or agencies, or even that the agencies weren't coordinating with each other, which we know happens too often. The problem was the complete lack of a formalized, rapid and sustained response from all stakeholders.

In the weeks and months after that young man was shot, we convened local violence interrupters, state agencies, schools, and the Hartford Police Department regularly to look back at shootings involving Hartford youth.

Over the course of those meetings we developed a plan to reduce the likelihood of a young person ending up in the same situation again.

Today, within 24-hours of a young person's involvement in violence, our Youth Violence Prevention Working Group comes together to assess and develop a coordinated approach to best connect the victims, their families, and their friends with immediate support – including mental health services, housing and relocation, and access to youth programming.

Our Rapid Response Protocol is coordinated, immediate, and it addresses the unmet needs of the victim, their family, and the community, to reduce the likelihood of future violence.

In order to facilitate this response system, we hired a full-time juvenile specialist to work in the Police Department.

We will continue to do more, like our extended hours program at recreation centers, support for the PAL program and Peacebuilders, and of course the Youth Service Corps. But the truth is that what probably makes the biggest difference is rapid intervention and sustained, coordinated support — individual by individual.

And our goal should be simple: that when we know of a young person who has been a victim of violence, we make a promise to ourselves and our community that we won't let it become a predictor of anything other than a strong, effective, coordinated response.

### **Chronic Absenteeism**

Youth homelessness and youth violence are awful, traumatic experiences that too many young people in our city have faced. But there is another issue that affects a far greater number of young people in Hartford. And it, too, can lead to dreams deferred and lost.

Almost half of the children in our city are either chronically absent from school, or they're at risk of becoming chronically absent. Let that sink in. Nearly one out of every two students in our school system is chronically absent or awfully close to being chronically absent. It starts early. One in three kindergartners misses more than ten percent of school days. And in the transition from 8th to 9th grade, attendance drops dramatically.

Over the past year, Superintendent Torres-Rodriguez and I have worked closely together on chronic absenteeism. She's laid out a strong plan — including partnering with Attendance Works, a nationally recognized organization, to put in place a wide range of strategies to re-engage students.

The causes of absenteeism are many and complicated. Like all of you, I've talked with so many students who've disengaged from school — either because of health challenges, transportation, or because they just feel too far behind already. The Superintendent told me of two brothers, who alternate going to school each year so that the other can care for their siblings.

Issues like that can't be solved inside the walls of our schools alone. That's why we've refocused the mission of Hartford's Opportunity Youth Collaborative, a coalition of forty youth

providers, to be the schools' external partner in this work. And I've asked our Department of Children, Families, Youth and Recreation to make it their number one priority.

And we need to make sure that priority is reflected in our budget. Governor Lamont's proposed budget increases funding for alliance districts like Hartford — but cities are explicitly allowed to keep half of that increase to defray city costs, rather than passing it along to the Board of Education.

We shouldn't do that. I propose that we pass all of that increase through to the Board of Education. But more than that, I propose that we earmark half of that increase for initiatives that will help reduce chronic absenteeism — either by funding an expansion of the community school model, or by funding additional attendance specialists.

And finally, I appeal to our entire community. If you work in a business and you see kids out of school during the day, ask them why. If your neighbor's children aren't in school during the day while your neighbor's at work, talk with them about it. All of us have to shoulder up, side by side — this is our responsibility, together as a community. And it may be the single most important thing we can do.

### **Culture of Respect**

As I said, we've done a lot — and we have a lot more to do. But before we close, I want to address an issue that needs to be addressed.

A few weeks ago, we received a memo from one of our police officers that described painful harassment and a deeply distressing and totally unacceptable work environment.

That memo highlighted changes we needed to make as a city when it comes to how we handle discrimination and harassment complaints, and we made some of those changes quickly.

But our goal isn't and shouldn't be to just have a better system for tracking and responding to complaints. Our goal is to foster a culture free from harassment in the first place. Where colleagues don't tolerate it in each other, where supervisors don't tolerate it on their teams, and where nobody accepts it when they hear it. That's what zero tolerance really means.

One of the ways we pursue that culture is building a team that's inclusive and diverse, and I am proud of the fact that a majority of our senior leadership team are women of color – who do outstanding work for this city.

But clearly we need to do more, and part of that is listening. Just before coming over here, I met again with our LGBTQ+ Commission, and tomorrow evening some of our department heads will be meeting again with our Women's Commission, to talk about the changes we've made, the steps we plan to take, and to hear their ideas and feedback.

We're committed to building a work environment in every department that's welcoming, and where no matter what you look like or how you identify, you feel respected and valued.

With respect to the police department specifically: pending feedback from our LGBTQ+ and our Women's Commission, Chief Rosado plans to engage a national organization to conduct a thorough review of culture and climate in our department, and that's the right thing to do.

Transparency means never being afraid to shine a light on our faults and acknowledge where we fall short. That's how we've approached our biggest challenges, and that's how we'll approach any that come before us — including this one.

### **Work Left to Do**

I said at the start, that the State of our City is stronger than it has been in decades, but that we have much, much more work to do.

Things worth doing are rarely easy. But tonight, I want to close on one more thing that I think we all have to do as a city. And this one actually is a little easier. It's this:

We need to be proud of our city. And we need to let the world know it. We can't hesitate any longer to highlight how far we've come — or is the size and audacity of our vision. Because I'll stack Hartford up against any small city in America – our grit, our culture, our spirit, our arts, our innovation, our determination, our talent.

A couple of weeks ago, Maker space CT launched their final phase of construction, with the motto “What will you make?” And last year, a local marketing group ran a digital marketing campaign called “Make Hartford Yours.”

I love them both, and I love them both together. Because they highlight so much about what’s beautiful and true in our city — and about the moment we’re at today. In Hartford, people are making things every day.

Making amazing food, making amazing art, making new spaces, making new businesses, making advances in technology that are at the leading edge of the fourth industrial revolution, making new opportunities — sometimes making a way where it feels like there is no way.

And this is a city that you can make your own. We’ve got the arts, culture and activity of a much bigger city — but we’re small enough that you can become a part of the fabric of this town and shape it. And so whether you live in Hartford or near Hartford or far away from Hartford right now, join us in making a new future for our historic city. Make Hartford Yours.

Whether your family’s been here for generations, whether you came for work a decade ago, whether you came as a refugee or whether you left behind the devastation of a hurricane two years ago, this city is yours. Fight for it. Work for it. Help reimagine and remake it. But don’t ever doubt it, and don’t ever count it out.

We’re a city that fights when we’re down, and we fight for those who are down. We’re a city that stands together. We are the strong heart of our region, and the Capital of this great State. And right now we are a city with the chance to cast off the malaise and the stagnation and the doubt that’s plagued Hartford for too damn long. We fought to build momentum and we’ve got it. We will not slow down, we will not stop, and we will not go back.

Because we’re just getting started.

May God bless all of you, and may God Bless the great City of Hartford.