

Mayor Strimling - State of the City

January 14, 2019

Welcome colleagues and all who have joined us here tonight, and hello to you who are watching at home. Thank you for being part of this dialogue about our beloved city. Because of you Portland is a remarkable place to live and work, and I am honored that you have chosen to be here this evening.

Is the state of our city strong? According to our annual report;

The unemployment rate in the city, as of march 2018, was 2.2% as compared to the national rate of 4.1%. 47% of Portland's population have postsecondary degrees, almost double the statewide average. While Maine is reported to be the state with the oldest median age of 43.5 years, Portland's median age is under 36. Of course, Bon Appetite just named Portland the 2018 restaurant city of the year. And last, but not least, Portland has more microbreweries per capita than any other city in the nation (and I know councilor Batson is making it his goal to try every one...).".

The state of our city is strong, in so many ways. But in truly assessing our strength as a city, I often think back to the challenge Rev. Kenneth Lewis, pastor of the AME Zion church, issued to us on the day I was inaugurated. A challenge I have never forgotten. He said:

"Have we listened to the 'uns'? Have we listened to the unemployed, the unhoused, the unnourished, the unhealthy, the unconnected, or the unappreciated?

"Have we listened to the 'misses'? Have we listened to the misunderstood, the mischaracterized, or the misrepresented?

"Have we listened to the 'disses'? The disenfranchised, the discouraged, the displaced, disillusioned, and disproportionately affected?"

For three years, I have tried to measure my success, our city's success, through the eyes of his challenge.

Certainly, in many ways we have made progress.

We secured funding to transform our elementary schools.

We're on track to building 200 workforces housing units by 2020.

We passed one of the largest increases in school funding in decades.

We provided rent and tax relief for our lowest income seniors.

We reformed corporate welfare so our workers are paid a living wage.

We created an office to support immigrants and refugees.

We now have body cameras on our police officers.

We banned bee killing pesticides that are a danger to our children.

We are now requiring businesses to benchmark their energy use.

And we now power city hall by the sun.

I'm very proud of what we have achieved for our city in the past three years. We've done a lot. But we can't rest on our laurels. We have to keep going.

Yes, we have more economic development than we have seen in decades and profits are soaring for some, but still, our city shelter is as crowded as it has ever been. Every night, three times more people, the misses, the disses, and the uns, seek shelter than our single facility can humanely serve.

Yes, our growth in valuation is ascending at a pace we have rarely seen. In fact, within the next few years our city's value will probably exceed \$10 billion dollars. Wow. That is remarkable. But still, fixed income and middle class families, the misses, the disses, and the uns are being squeezed out by higher rents, utilities, taxes and the general cost of living in our city.

Yes, unemployment is remarkably low. But still, our wages are stagnant. Too many working families, the misses, the disses, and the uns still need to take second and third jobs to support their family.

Yes, over a thousand units of housing have been completed in the past five years, but only 11 affordable units were approved and built in the past three years. No wonder we have 1,315 families on the waiting list at Portland housing authority. Think about that. 1,300 families on a waiting list looking for housing in our city. The misses, the disses, and the uns.

Yes, we have established an office of economic opportunity, but every week 3-4 families, facing persecution and possible death in their home countries, are arriving in our city needing our help. Mothers. Fathers. Children. The misses, the disses, and the uns. They bring creativity,

intelligence, skills, and hope. They bring their labor and tax dollars. Their children are the foundation of a future of growth and stability. But the help we are providing so far is falling short. We don't have enough housing, and we don't provide enough legal help to navigate the process to become permanent members of our community.

Cities all across America are experiencing these same struggles: extreme wealth is moving into the inner urban core, while the poor and middle class, whose families have lived here for generations, are being displaced and have to commute from cities like Biddeford and Westbrook where housing is still affordable.

No one in this chamber, or in this city, wants that for us. But I am fearful we are closer than ever to a city where the great middle -- teachers, bus drivers, nurses, service industry workers, immigrants, artists, students, and tradespeople can no longer afford to live in the city they are helping to build and run every day.

In this final year of my first term, I will continue to focus on the issues that disproportionately affect this group. What issues are they? The environment first, because if we don't get this one right, nothing else matters. Education, because our children will have to provide the solutions of tomorrow. Housing, because all human beings have a right to shelter and security. Workers, because it is through our labor that we will rise up together and build a more just society. And inclusive transparent democracy, because when more people are involved in our democracy and see how our decisions are made, more decisions are made for the greater good.

Let me address each issue.

The environment comes first, because that is the overarching crisis of our time. In October, an international report was issued that made it clear that global climate change is an unparalleled threat to human survival. This is not a far-away problem. A 1.5 degree rise in global temperature will put Commercial Street, Baxter Boulevard and East Bayside underwater within decades. Imagine Becky's Diner, Hannaford, the Maine state pier and the Bayside Trail all gone, all under water. We can't let that happen.

The only responsible course is to begin now to end our dependence on fossil fuels and, at the same time, develop our city's capacity in the green economy, including local food production, energy regeneration, community relationships and mutual aid networks.

Our environment, as Rev Lewis might describe it, is "mis-used" and "distressed."

Before I talk about bringing solar energy to Portland, let me tell you about a community center in Puerto Rico called Casa Puebla. Decades before hurricane Maria hit, Casa Puebla had installed

solar panels on the roof. After the storm, when the rest of the island was without power, Casa Puebla became a literal beacon of light. Residents walked miles to reach the center for food, clean water, medicine, news from the only functioning radio, and power for life-saving oxygen tanks.

Casa Puebla understood the perils of dependence on fossil fuels. Because they valued community resilience and self-sufficiency, and installed solar panels, they were able to save lives and offer hope in their darkest hour. We must be able to do the same.

On the good news front, thanks to a small group of committed activists, just a few weeks ago we “flipped the switch” on one of the largest solar arrays in the state. With that step, we literally began powering city hall with the sun. But honestly, it is not even the tip of the melting iceberg of what we can and must do.

There are half a dozen students from Casco Bay High School in the front row. There are also members of sierra club’s climate action team in the audience. Together, we have all been working for over a year on a proposal to build the equivalent of two more Ocean Ave solar arrays to power all of our schools.

The proposal is very simple - install a fleet of solar arrays on the roofs and grounds of just six of our schools, and we will be able to generate enough electricity to reduce the carbon footprint of our schools to almost zero. In addition to the environmental, community, and education benefits, this project will ultimately save Portland taxpayers’ money, while also showing all of us how to promote environmental stewardship and the importance of climate action.

Think about it. 100% of our schools will be powered by the sun. That means, no matter what else happens as climate change transforms our city, we will be able to continue educating 100% of our kids.

The students at Casco Bay who have been working on this proposal put together a video I would like to show.

In 2019, let us lay the groundwork to SolaRise all Portland schools. Together, we SolarRise!

Now, let’s talk transportation.

We must reduce the number of fossil fuel cars on our roads. And the best way to get there is by greatly enhancing our public transportation. The first step is providing metro with the resources to build ridership and reduce traffic.

First let me acknowledge that metro has been doing great work over the past five years. Expanding service to Portland students and creating the husky line for USM, has added thousands of riders and helped to keep hundreds of cars off the roads.

But we still have miles to go before public transit becomes the preferred option of commuters to our city and in our region. Currently, on many bus routes, including those on our major corridors, people have to wait up to an hour for a ride. That will never get us where we need to be.

Research shows, that when no one has to wait more than 15 minutes for a bus, you cross the public transit utilization tipping point. And what do we need to hit this magic 15-minute number? Only 15 more buses during peak hours.

As our director Greg Jordan, and the president of the board, councilor ray, wrote to me, “getting to the goal of buses coming every 15 minutes would be a game changer.” Well, it is time to change the game because the return on investment for this one step in reducing climate change is well worth the costs.

15 busses to get to 15 minutes! Councilor Ray, I think I have our marketing slogan...

But busses are not enough. We can't get everyone who needs to be downtown on just one form of public transportation. So I will be asking the sustainability and transportation committee to take a hard look at the feasibility of bringing train service back to the eastern waterfront. That's right: trains! We have the rails. We have the bridge. All we need is the political will to put a plan in place to leverage the federal dollars we will need.

Current estimates by the sierra club show that installing hybrid electric rail cars to come into Portland across the B&M plant site could result in 600-800 fewer cars coming in and out of our downtown every day. With WEX and Vets Choice bringing a thousand new jobs to the eastern waterfront, and with all the traffic down there already squeezing out our fishermen and women, we must act quickly.

Let's put ourselves on a path to installing light, hybrid rail that will bring 100 people per trip, 100 people without a car, to the eastern waterfront in the next five years.

In the end, if we do these three things: make our schools 100% reliant on the sun, build a bus system that dramatically reduces commuter traffic, and install light rail to bring workers downtown from surrounding communities, we will have done more to impact climate change and build self-reliance from fossil fuels, than almost everything we have done in the past ten years. The time to act is now.

Now let's talk education. Are we listening to the parents, the students, and teachers?

First, what have we accomplished? I am so proud that a little over a year ago, after 20 years of trying, the people passed the four school bond and we have now started the rebuilding process. Just last week the school board approved the design of Lyseth and they are now beginning the planning for the next three. I said it last year, and I'll say it again: this was a generational victory that lays the groundwork to ensure that in the city of Portland, a child's address or income level will never dictate the quality of their educational environment.

Also in the last year we successfully passed one of the largest increases in school funding that we have seen in decades. I am very pleased that the people of this city, the parents, teachers and students convinced this body to pass a 4.9% increase in revenue, that was then overwhelmingly affirmed by almost 80% of Portland voters. The people of this city support investing their tax dollars in public education, of that I am sure.

This year, for the first time in a lot of years, eight, to be exact, I actually look forward to working with our governor to pursue the education funding we need. Can I just say, thank goodness we have Janet Mills in the Blaine House! She and I go back a ways and I can't wait to work with her on behalf of the city. I know that education funding will be one of her top priorities. She, and our new democratic legislature, understand that cutting school dollars only increases property taxes and hurts students. I am optimistic that we have a real chance at getting more of the state money we deserve.

Equally important to securing the funding we need is making our schools the best they can be by fully funding the Portland promise, our commitment to academic excellence and equity for every child. Our achievement gap is still simply too high for our lowest income and minority students. In both reading and math, our low income and non-white students trail their peers by 35 points or more. And this gap is unfortunately not new.

As many of you know, Roz Bernstein, the former chair of our school board, passed away a couple of weeks ago. For those who don't know, Roz helped to found head start in Portland public schools. Decades ago, she understood the importance of early childhood education. Sadly, decades later, our early childhood investments have not measurably increased.

In Roz's honor and for our children's future, I am calling on us to make 2019 the year we finally pass universal pre-k for our 4-year olds. I am certainly not alone in calling for us to achieve this milestone. It has been a priority of our school board for over a decade. But, unfortunately, because we have not yet gotten it done, we are now falling behind so many cities across America and even our surrounding communities. Currently, less than a quarter of Portland's 4-year olds attend public pre-school, compared to almost 39% of 4-year olds statewide.

It is past time for Portland to catch up.

That is why I am very pleased that superintendent Botana and the school board are now working on a plan, and that chairman Rodriguez has made this his top priority. It is my hope that the school board now passes this plan and brings it forward this year. Because, if you do, it is my solemn promise to the people of this city, as your mayor, I will do everything in my power to finally pass universal pre-k for all four-year olds in Portland.

And while I am optimistic that the legislature and governor mills will come through for us, let me also state as clearly as I can, if Augusta is not able to find the money to fully fund the budget to educate our children, implement the Portland promise, and create universal pre-k, I will not support cutting the school board's budget below what they say they need. They have been elected to do a job, and we should respect their ability to balance school needs vs a tax levy they believe the community can support.

Last but not least on education, let me acknowledge the importance of USM to our city. I recently read an article about two cities in the south of the same size and how one has thrived over the past twenty years and the other has stagnated. While there are many factors affecting the difference, the one variant they found that made the most difference, is that the thriving city has a first rate public university. So let me say as I have said every year, whatever we can do to help USM thrive, count me in.

Before I finish on the topic of education, I want to acknowledge someone in this room. Gerald Talbot. If you don't know him, you should.

Gerry's family has been in Maine for eleven generations. Although much of his family came from Harlem, Maine, which is now China, he was born and grew up in Bangor. He served in the United States army from 1953–1956, and was then a printer at the Portland press herald for 11 years. He participated in the 1963 march on Washington and went to court three times to sue against housing discrimination. In 1972, in a crowded field, Gerry won election to the Maine house of representatives representing Portland as the first African American ever to serve in that body. Among his many accomplishments in the legislature, he sponsored and passed a bill to remove the n-word from 12 Maine place-names - a precursor to our struggles today trying to remove racist Native American mascots from schools around the state. After serving in the legislature he served on and chaired the state board of education for a number of years.

Because of his remarkable accomplishments on behalf of the state of Maine, councilor Ali and I recently reached out to the chair of the school board, and with the support of many of our colleagues around this dais, have asked him to accept, and he has agreed to bring it forward to

the full school board, our nomination of Gerald Talbot to be considered for the renaming of one of our elementary schools. It is time for our city to honor this great man.

Now, let's talk housing. Nowhere do we see the widening gap between our poor and wealthy more clearly. The "displaced" "misplaced" and "unhoused" of our city.

Over a year ago, another accomplishment I am very proud that this body passed is a property tax and rent relief program for our fixed income seniors that could amount to as much as \$2,400 per household. Next year we should look at expanding this relief to all age groups, effectively creating a progressive property tax structure that actively begins to reverse the wealth gap.

We also need to protect tenants from being dis-placed out of their homes or unfairly dis-qualified from getting an apartment.

Providing 90 days notice to tenants before eviction, will balance the market and give tenants time to find and negotiate for a new apartment. 30 days, our current system, is simply not enough time, and can force people into taking another inadequate apartment that is too expensive, can lead to instability, and even into our shelter system.

And, right now there are hundreds of families in Portland with section 8 vouchers who cannot get into an apartment simply because the landlord refuses to take their form of payment. That is unfair and inhumane. No one with the means to pay the rent should be refused an available apartment.

Two years ago, by very close votes, this body rejected providing 90 days notice to tenants and banning landlords from discriminating against section 8 tenants. I hope the housing committee will take these issues up again and try to build a compromise that this body can support.

The other significant step we took last year was with our housing trust. Last year I challenged us to take the proceeds from the sale of WEX and use it to build affordable housing. I am very proud that the council did just that with a million of those dollars. That investment allowed us to leverage the building of almost 200 units of affordable housing that should come on-line by 2020. This will begin to make a huge difference in the lives of those so in need for an affordable place to live

We have a million dollars left from the WEX sale and I hope we will consider immediately putting it in the housing trust, so we can get it out the door and perhaps get another 100-200 units in the pipeline as soon as possible.

Second, I am pleased that the finance committee is now deliberating how to best capitalize the trust on an ongoing basis. We need 1,000 new units of workforce housing in this city -- housing

that is truly affordable to the family making the median income -- the schoolteacher, the firefighter, the janitor, the delivery person. And the most efficient way we can get it is by requiring developers to restrict the amount of rent they can charge in exchange for subsidies. Fully capitalizing the housing trust will give us the ability to do just that.

And next, let's talk about our workers. Because, if we want to confront income inequality, we must confront the wages and working conditions of those who make our economy work. We must listen to the "unemployed" the "unhealthy" and the often "unappreciated" workers of our city.

Over the years, we have taken a few important steps. My predecessor successfully led the effort to raise the minimum wage in Portland. A 30% increase that gave us a competitive advantage over surrounding communities and provided our lowest income workers with a much-needed boost.

Today, our next big step in gaining a competitive advantage and improving the material conditions for all of our workers, is passing a mandatory paid sick days ordinance. We first proposed this idea two years ago because upwards of 19,000 workers in Portland are currently not able to take a single paid day off to care for themselves when they, or a loved one, are sick.

Imagine if you are a single parent earning \$12/hour. And your child needs to go to the doctor, but because your employer does not offer paid time off, you have to miss a day's pay to help your child get the care they need? A day's pay from a paycheck that is already barely enough to pay the rent.

Or, imagine if you worked in child or elder care, and you woke up with the flu one morning. But because your employer didn't offer paid sick time, you had to go to work, thereby risking the health of the kids or elderly you work with.

Neither of these examples are imaginary. They are real life situations we are hearing from people in Portland and they are why so many advocates for workers, and public health officials around the country, support mandatory paid sick leave policies at the federal, state and local level.

The good news is that a draft ordinance for the council to consider is about to be reported out. The ordinance, as amended, ensures that almost every worker in Portland receives paid time off, defines family inclusively, ensures that workers have broad discretion to care for their loved ones, and has given businesses important tools to ensure sick time is used in good faith. It has also ensured that seasonal workers will not be left behind by requiring that all employees get to use their time after 45 days on the job. It also gives new start-up businesses an opportunity to get rolling before they have to implement the new policy.

And best of all, just last week, the committee unanimously agreed that a two-tiered system, which would have treated workers at smaller business as if they need less sick time, is not right for Portland.

The amended version fundamentally meets the goals of the original, but includes a few modifications that make it even more workable for employees and employers alike. I applaud the committees hard work and I look forward to supporting what they bring forward when it comes to us.

While I am on the topic of the HHS committee, let me quickly commend that they have included on their list of priorities this year, exploring the possibility of opening an overdose prevention site in Portland. This kind of progressive thinking, which originated with councilor Batson, is the same kind that led to our extremely effective needle exchange program. I look forward to seeing what the committee brings forward as we explore every possible angle in regard to confronting the opioid crisis.

Now let's talk wages. Last year, Portland took a very important step by requiring that all companies receiving corporate welfare from the city pay a livable wage. Now it is time for us to pass the same provision for all city contracts. Because if it's good enough to mandate for private developers to pay a livable wage, as this council unanimously agreed, then it should be good enough for the city to follow.

But wages are only a piece of what workers need. They also need adequate, industry-recognized skills training to do the job. That is why I hope the economic development committee will act on Councilor Ali's proposal to create an apprenticeship program this year. But we also must require employers who use city money to have real, measurable, registered apprenticeship programs that ensure our next generation of workers can build and rebuild our city, while following a pathway to prosperity. Skilled workers are secure workers.

If you can believe it, we also have no local requirements that a contractor provide adequate safety training, or workers comp insurance, or health insurance or even have a good track record in terms of not violating state labor laws.

Our current policy? The lowest bid wins. That's it. This must change. Because anyone who has tried to save a few dollars on home construction knows that 9 times out of 10, there's nothing more expensive than cheap labor.

The finance committee has been reviewing a responsible contractor ordinance since September and will soon have a public hearing and vote. I am optimistic that my colleagues will stand up

for workers, as well as everyone who uses our public buildings, and I hope we can get this ordinance passed and into law before another construction season goes by.

And now let's talk about inclusive transparent government and election reform so that we may bring the "disenfranchised," "the unconnected" and the "misrepresented" into our political process.

The people of this city, all of them, not just those with money and access, should have a stronger voice in our democracy. Our people understand best what solutions will help them remain a part of our city's prosperity. As we work toward a more perfect system--a more transparent and accountable system, a system that is more responsive to the needs of people--we deepen and strengthen our democracy.

To make our government more responsive, there are four steps we must take:

First, let's talk about the funding of campaigns. Back in 1996, Maine passed a groundbreaking clean elections law, and, overnight, every candidate running for the state legislature or the governor's office was able to get the resources they needed to run a competitive campaign, without voters having to worry about the influence of big donors.

Unfortunately, year after year, we are seeing campaigns in Portland more and more financed by big money.

So let's stop. Let's level the playing field. Let's give every candidate who wants to run an equal opportunity to compete and an equal opportunity to avoid being influenced by big donors.

That is why this year I will also ask the council to create a municipal clean elections program for city council elections. Many municipalities around the country including Santa Fe, Austin, Long Beach, Tucson, new haven, and boulder, already have programs in place.

It is time for Portland to become the first city or town in our state to get big money out of municipal politics.

Second, we need to put in place lobbyist disclosure rules. Right now, all we have for disclosure is a request that those who speak to us publicly reveal if they represent someone other than themselves. But, unlike lobbyists to the state or federal government, there is no requirement that someone register with the city before they lobby the council or staff.

That is why I will ask this council to consider a local ordinance that anyone lobbying or advocating for a client should be required to register with our city clerk, declare the names of

their clients, declare their campaign contributions to any candidates, the policy positions they are trying to influence, and disclose the dates of all communications with elected or city officials.

Hundreds of millions of dollars pass through this building every year. Transparency in government is essential to continue building trust with the public which is why the public needs to know who is walking into this building every day, seeking to influence policy.

Third, we should pass ranked choice voting for all municipal elections. In 2011, Portland became the first city in the state to use RCV in our election for mayor. Then, the state followed suit, and we now use it for all federal elections and state primaries. Hopefully, this year, the legislature will pass a constitutional amendment so we can use it for our state general elections, including the governor's race.

And, as we know, rcv is immensely popular with Portland voters. It passed overwhelmingly in our city both in 2016 and in 2017. So, I plan to ask this council to pass a charter amendment to expand ranked choice voting to all our local races.

Last but certainly not least, let's discuss resident voting. A group of committed activists first brought this issue to our ballot box in 2010. The ordinance lost by less than 5% of the vote.

A few years later, when the state threatened to withhold aid for residents who were banned by federal law from working, this body set aside hundreds of thousands of dollars a year to make sure those seeking asylum had food and shelter. I am so thankful, that one of governor mills first acts was to restore this funding.

Then, a few years after that, when candidate trump came to town and claimed our Somali residents were causing crime and detracting from our city's health, hundreds of us stood on the steps of city hall and told him we would not tolerate his intolerance.

Then, when president trump tried to limit even legal immigration, a thousand of us packed the airport to oppose the Muslim ban.

Again and again, our city has said immigrants are too important to our future not to act in solidarity with them. We understand that without immigration, a third of our schools would be closed. We understand that without immigration thousands of jobs would remain unfilled. We understand that without immigration, our arts and culture, our restaurants, our language, our thinking, and our politics would all be so much poorer.

But right now, immigrants who are not yet citizens are disenfranchised. If you can't vote, just like women and people of color who were blocked from voting for much of our history, your

interests are too easily ignored. Immigrants who are not yet citizens work in every business sector; they pay us taxes, support our schools, pay tuition to earn their degrees, care for our children, pick up our trash, and perform the unseen work that keeps our city running. They are even enlisted in the military to fight for the freedoms we citizens hold so dear.

They are asking for a direct voice in our government and they deserve it.

Extending voting rights to all residents in municipal elections, as Councilor Ali and the immigrant community have proposed, re-affirms what we already understand about the meaningful contributions immigrants make to our communities. It will be good for all of us here in Portland, and it will be a full-scale repudiation of Trump and all those who believe immigrants are more of a burden than they are a lifeline.

Rev Lewis asked us: “have we listened to the unemployed, the unhoused, the unnourished, the unhealthy, the unconnected, or the unappreciated? Have we listened to the misunderstood, the mischaracterized, or the misrepresented? Have we listened to the disenfranchised, the discouraged, the displaced, disillusioned, and disproportionately affected?”

As you hear that list, I hope you realize who I believe Rev Lewis really wanted us to hear from. Who he wanted us to listen to. I believe he was referring to almost all of us. We were all once un-educated. We have all been misunderstood. We all have felt discouraged.

In 2019, as we continue the work of trying to reverse the widening gap between our wealthiest and everyone else. As we try to make sure our workers are safe and paid well. As we work to build the best educational system we can. As we work to make our city more resilient in response to the threat of climate change. As we work to ensure that every member of our community can fully participate in our democracy. As we work to make sure everyone has a home.

We must do more than just listen to the voices of the misses, the disses, and the uns. We must also seek and include their guidance, your guidance, and then use the power they have loaned us to represent them.

We must act decisively and with the full understanding of, what another great reverend - Dr. Martin Luther King called, “the fierce urgency of now.”

As I close, let me once again thank the people of Portland for putting their trust in me to lead this city. I have spent every day since I took the oath of office three years ago listening to you and fighting to bring your voice into city hall. I will continue that work until the last day I occupy this seat.

Thank you and now let's get to work.