

2019 State of the City Address – Melrose, MA

President Lemmerman, members of the Board of Aldermen, Chairman O'Connell and members of the School Committee, Superintendent Taymore, Senator Lewis, Representative Brodeur, Mayor Dolan, fellow Melrosians,

Good evening and thank you for being here tonight.

Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge Mayor Rob Dolan for his service to our community.

This is my first and only State of the City address. I have been Mayor for less than one year and I have less than a year to go—and yes, I am still beaming. Each day has been an honor.

Serving in public office is just one way to get involved in the community. I first became involved with the community as a Lincoln School parent and volunteer. Later I became a Scout parent, a Little League parent, a ward alderman for 20 years and now I have the honor of serving as Mayor.

Like me, many of you are connected to the community in many different ways. For some it started 40 years ago; for others just recently. Maybe it was as a PTO volunteer; a coach; a volunteer at the Milano Center; or a local business owner.

Each of you is here tonight because of your commitment to the City of Melrose. But Melrose is more than a city. It is a true community, and this community is built on the hard work and dedication of generations of residents.

And thanks to that hard work and dedication, we have a lot to be proud of. Our public library is a jewel in the center of the city.

Mount Hood is a beautiful multipurpose facility, where golfers meet on nice days and children go sledding in the cold months.

Memorial Hall, once deserted most of the time, is bustling night and day, with classes, meetings, private parties, weddings, and community events.

The high school athletic complex is one of the best in the area, and home not only to the Melrose High School and middle school football and baseball teams, but also to the Melrose Americans minor-league baseball team.

Our downtown has been described so often as “vibrant” that it has become a cliché. But it's true, now more than ever before, as we continue to welcome new restaurants and shops to Main Street. The two major construction projects that are going on, while a bit of an inconvenience at the moment, represent a significant investment in our downtown.

And finally, something that is dear to my heart: We care for our veterans both by making sure that their needs are provided for and by honoring them in public events, including the Memorial Day parade and our Veterans Day observances.

We are also a community of dedicated public servants. From the Department of Public Works employee plowing our streets at 2 a.m. on a freezing winter night, to the dedicated 8th grade science teacher with 31 kids in the class, to the police officers and firefighters who are ready 24 hours a day to ensure our safety, to the City Hall staff – many of whom are now doing the work of 2 or 3 people – it is an honor to work with you. Your commitment to this city inspires me on a daily basis.

Together, we have created a city—a community—of which we are very proud.

Unfortunately, there are some areas of our community today that we should no longer feel proud of.

We shouldn't be proud that our funding for the schools is just above the bare minimum required by the state.

We shouldn't be proud that so many of our experienced teachers and principals leave Melrose for other communities where they can earn more.

We shouldn't be proud that the Melrose Public Library, if cut any further, could lose its state accreditation.

We shouldn't be proud that our school budget for art supplies is down to \$6 per student for the school year. How ironic—a city that is so proud of its 100-year-old volunteer symphony orchestra and has such a vibrant arts community, is, at the same time, about to see cuts that will threaten our schools' music and art programs.

We shouldn't be proud that one of our fire engines has had \$64,000 in repairs this year alone, since we cannot afford a new one.

We shouldn't be proud that we are three years behind on funding sidewalk repairs.

We shouldn't be proud that our Senior Center's social worker is only funded at 5 hours per week.

We shouldn't be proud that we're in the bottom 12% of Per Pupil Spending IN THE STATE.

We shouldn't be proud of our crumbling public safety buildings, which cannot be addressed until we stabilize our financial position as a Community.

This is where we are TODAY.

The increases we are allowed under Proposition 2 ½ are simply not enough to fund the increasing cost of running our city. This has been a problem for years. We have streamlined our operations, combined departments, regionalized where we could, examined every expense, and the fact is, there are no more cuts to make. Or rather, there are no cuts that won't affect our quality of life.

On July 1, we will reach a critical point. Without an override, the modest increase we are proposing for the schools, which isn't even enough to maintain the status quo, will leave the rest of the city's departments in a deficit.

That is the problem we face this year, and it's not going to go away.

And I'm talking about keeping things as they are. As you know, the number of students in the Melrose Public Schools has been increasing, and we expect enrollments to continue to go up. Without additional teachers, and without the Beebe School to free up space, we will not be able to give any of our students the quality of education they need.

Without an override, everything that we as a community have worked so hard to create is in jeopardy. It comes down to THIS: Our city funding no longer matches our community values.

This is the state of our city today.

The new fiscal year will begin on July 1, but the future of Melrose will be determined on April 2, when you will vote yes or no on the override.

In the absence of millions of dollars in new funding, we will have to make a series of hard choices, none of them good.

If the override does not pass, we will only be able to increase the school budget by half of last year's increase. We know this isn't enough. If you have children in the schools, you already know that what we have this year is not enough. Next year will be worse because we will see:

- An increase in students
- An increase in the number of teachers we need
- An increase in special education costs
- An increase in the need for space and
- An increase to fund a new teachers' contract

We will have more students but no additional staff or space to accommodate them.

And that's not all. Providing even this small increase to the schools will require drastic cuts to city departments that have already been underfunded for years.

Many of these cuts will have a domino effect that will increase their impact. For example:

If we reduce staff by laying off employees, our unemployment costs will increase. As a rule of thumb, we would have to cut three people to save the cost of two positions because of unemployment.

The state requires that we contribute a set amount toward the schools. Cuts to our public works facilities budget, which includes school maintenance, may bring us below that required spending limit.

If we reduce the Melrose Public Library budget any further, we will not meet the state's required spending level and we risk the library losing its accreditation.

The Recreation Department pays rental fees for the use of the schools. If those programs are eliminated or cut back, the schools will lose that revenue, making their budget situation even worse.

Over the past 5 years, the city has allocated most of our new revenue to the school department. In order to do that, every other city department has gone without much needed increases.

We cannot cut our way out of this situation. The bottom line is that we must bring in more revenue in order to keep what we have today, and the only way to do this is through an override.

Without an override, the fate of our city would be the same as an abandoned house. At first, it just sits empty, but then the signs of neglect begin to show.

The grass becomes overgrown.

The paint chips.

The chimney crumbles.

A window is broken.

Soon a once proud house becomes an empty, dilapidated shell.

Without the override, we will become a city with shabby parks, decaying infrastructure, and failing schools.

Without the override, our finances will continue to fall short of our shared community values.

So what IS the current State of the City? Well, that really depends on you. Each one of you has to make a decision about the future of Melrose.

Will you keep it up or let it continue to unravel? The answer to this question is no longer in the hands of city government—it is now up to you.

Even though right now our financial forecast looks bleak, I remain hopeful.

I'm hopeful because over the last several months I've witnessed a level of civic engagement that I have not seen in years.

I've seen hundreds of you show up to our Listening Sessions to describe the city you want to be.

I've received over a thousand responses to our community questionnaire, where you detailed the community services you value.

My staff and I have read and responded to your emails and phone calls.

You have told me you closely follow the budget series on my blog and in the newspaper.

You have shown up. You have done your homework. You see a need and you stand ready to fill it.

AND I BELIEVE YOU WILL.

Thank you and good night.