

2019 SOTC – Hoboken, NJ; 01/29/2019

Mayor Bhalla's 2019 State of the City, as Prepared for Delivery –

Thank you Councilwoman Emily Jabbour for that warm introduction, I'm proud to call you a friend and colleague. I appreciate your leadership on the City Council, and for being an important partner in moving our City forward. Thank you to the Hoboken High Chorus and Drama Club for performing tonight, Captain Charles Campbell, and to Stevens Institute of Technology and President Nariman Farvardin for hosting us. President Farvardin couldn't be here tonight, but I want to thank him for his leadership, and all Stevens does for our community.

Thank you to the Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Christine Johnson, and all of the Hoboken Board of Education members for joining us. Under their leadership, the public schools have grown by leaps and bounds in the past several years. They've initiated our highly successful Passport to Learning after school programming, developed a summer science camp, implemented STEM programming, and much more. In 2018, 94% of the students in the graduating class received college acceptance, with \$13.5 million awarded in scholarships.

I'm biased, but Hoboken is the best place in America to call home, and I'm inspired by the generosity and can-do spirit of our residents. We're joined tonight by one of my favorite young people in Hoboken, Satya Singh. Four years ago, Satya was diagnosed with cancer at just one year old. Satya, with the strength of her mother, Raakhee and father, Agan, had to endure long hospital stays, hundreds of doctor visits, sleepless nights, and a six hour surgery to remove a tumor. She didn't just beat back cancer, though. With the grace of God, Satya is now cancer free. Today, at the age of 5, she's inspiring countless children across the country. To give back, Satya and her parents have raised over half a million dollars towards childhood cancer research. Let's take a moment and thank Hoboken's own Satya Singh, Hoboken Girls' 2018 Girl of the Year, for turning tragedy into triumph.

Good evening to the Hoboken City Council, neighbors, friends, and residents. Hoboken, it is my honor to present to you the State of our City.

Last year, I stood before you at my inauguration and reflected on why I ran for Mayor. I knew that Hoboken had just begun to live up to its full potential. Mayor Dawn Zimmer spent eight and a half years laying the groundwork upon which Hoboken could both grow and thrive, and I felt a responsibility to honor and build on her work. In my inaugural remarks, I laid out my vision for what I believed Hoboken could become. I envisioned a progressive, forward thinking, 21st century model of what urban living could look like. And I am proud to say we've made incredible progress towards achieving that vision.

A city is only as good as the values that it lives by. In my first act, on my first day as Mayor, I signed an Executive Order declaring Hoboken a fair and welcoming city. In a time of divisiveness, when the values embodied by the Statue of Liberty are under duress, when we fight over whether to build walls or not, I chose to signal to the world that Hoboken is open, that in our streets and neighborhoods, the American Dream is alive and well. We don't need Washington to define who we are, WE can do that.

We've translated our values into action, by taking concrete steps to ensure Hoboken is an inclusive place for people of all gender identities. For the first time ever, Hoboken earned a perfect 100 percent score in 2018 with the Human Rights Campaign, one of only two municipalities in the entire State to earn this distinction.

We're also committed to lending a hand to those less fortunate. We formed a homelessness taskforce, which in a few short months created a new food pantry open to all, developed job training and placement programs, secured housing vouchers for permanent housing, and more.

We also expanded the hours and budget of our tenant advocate, ensuring that underrepresented individuals have the proper representation in what can be a life-threatening situation. Last year, our tenant advocate, Andrew Sobel assisted over 100 residents and saved many from eviction and displacement.

Finally, to ensure fairness for our hardworking City workers, we established paid parental leave for all city employees, because those first few months with a child should not leave someone with an empty wallet.

In other words, we are not just talking about community values, we are living community values by making them the law of our beautiful city, and 2019 will be no different. I will continue to look for ways to help each and every resident feel welcome, safe and cared for.

This means serious investment in YOUR quality of life. That means upgrading basic city basic services, and ensuring ample open space, restaurants and recreation for that precious time you have with friends and family.

We recently made major improvements to our municipal services with the re-opening of Hoboken's Office of Constituent Affairs. Since the office opening in July of 2018, Caroline Caulfield, our new Chief of Constituent Services, and her team have assisted over 500 residents. Under my administration, government is here to solve problems, not create them. From issues small to large, we want to be here for you.

Speaking of quality of life, as we've all experienced, common trash items found on our City streets and sidewalks are single use plastic bags. As of last week, these thin, flimsy, environmentally unfriendly bags are now a thing of the past in Hoboken. As of January 22, Hoboken is the largest municipality in New Jersey to ban single-use plastic bags.

But, we could not have undertaken this positive change without the advocacy of the Hoboken Green Team led by Councilman Jim Doyle, and in this case our students. When I was a Councilman, students from the All Saints Day School presented a compelling argument to the City Council to ban plastic bags at a time when the initiative wasn't as popular as it is today. These students planted a seed in my mind by educating me about an important topic. Their presentation resonated with me up until last year when I signed this ordinance into law. Many of those students, now a few

grades older, are here tonight. They are living proof that, by speaking up and making your voices heard, you can accomplish anything, no matter what your age.

I ask those students from All Saints to please stand so we can recognize them for their hard work.

Our students joining us here tonight is a reminder to all of us that we're building a stronger and safer City so we can leave Hoboken a better place for future generations. It is my goal to make our Mile Square one of the safest and most pedestrian friendly Cities in the entire Country. To that end, I am here tonight to announce the launch one of my most important priorities of 2019, Hoboken's Vision Zero campaign. Hoboken's ambitious Vision Zero campaign will aim to eliminate ALL traffic related deaths AND injuries by the year 2030. This major goal is not something we can accomplish alone - it will require a collaborative approach that includes the input of residents and other key stakeholders. We must enact bold, safe streets policies so no one has to endure the experience of being put in harm's way while crossing a street.

Improving Hoboken for our future generations also includes investments in our school system and recreation opportunities. Last year, my administration negotiated an unprecedented 5 million dollars in public benefits from the developer of our downtown Hilton Hotel. The tax-free public benefits include a 2 million dollar investment into renovating the former uptown YMCA, which has sat vacant for years. This money will be used to finally construct a new community pool at no taxpayer expense, classroom space for our students, and an uptown library branch.

As part of this historic agreement, we have also secured over 1 million dollars in infrastructure improvements, and a 200,000 dollar contribution to our Affordable Housing Trust Fund, thanks to the advocacy of Councilwoman Vanessa Falco. Finally, the agreement includes almost 400,000 dollars to benefit our charter schools, and an unprecedented 1 million dollar endowment for the Hoboken Public Education Foundation, a local non-profit that has raised nearly half a million dollars since 2015 to support our schools. Again, all at zero taxpayer expense. Thank you to the Hoboken

Public Education Foundation, as well as the passionate advocates for our charter schools, YMCA and Library Boards for helping make this deal possible.

Now, I want to talk about another important quality of life issue - improving our infrastructure. When I ran for Mayor in 2017, I pledged to be Hoboken's "Infrastructure Mayor." From paving the streets we drive on to upgrading the water mains we rely on, we're taking critical steps forward.

This year, we're paving over 50 blocks of roads in Hoboken, more than doubling the amount from last year. We're also in the final stages of our Washington Street Project, with the paving of 11th to 15th Street scheduled to be completed in just a few months.

Perhaps the most critical infrastructure upgrades we have planned are with our water mains. Unfortunately, the large increase in water main breaks in recent years have been due to the current water contract that has tied Hoboken's hands for years, that provides zero proactive investments in new water mains.

Hoboken simply deserves better. Tonight, I am happy to announce that my administration is in the final stages of renegotiating our deal with SUEZ that will provide for over 1.5 million dollars in proactive water main replacements every year. We are also directly investing an additional \$10 million, over a two year span, to replace the oldest water mains in our system. Over the next 15 years, our new deal will include 33 million dollars in watermain infrastructure upgrades, and I will soon ask the City Council to join me in approving this new agreement.

The benefits to our infrastructure will not only help the residents of Hoboken, but also business owners city-wide. I want to take a moment to thank businesses like Battaglia's Furniture Store, Biggie's and others who have given so much to our City, and also welcome the dozens of new businesses and industries opening up.

To continue to build and grow our small business community, I am excited to see the progress that our Special Improvement District steering committee has made this year. With the Council's support, a Special Improvement District will soon be

established in Hoboken that will make investments and create marketing opportunities on behalf of our business community. Special Improvement Districts have been a great success in other parts of the State, and I know it will become a game changer for our businesses and property owners alike.

Supporting businesses also means continuing to make Hoboken a destination city. Yes, for the food, the walkability, and the proximity to New York City, but also as a hub for the arts and culture community. Hoboken's urban landscape should be inviting, beautiful, and culturally dynamic.

To this end, we have created innovative ways for city government to support art and culture in Hoboken. You will see new murals going up that reflect the history, the people, and the culture of Hoboken. It is a priority for me to continue to support local artists in Hoboken, and that is why in June of last year I signed an Executive Order that allocates one percent of all future city bonds to creative placemaking and other forms of public arts in Hoboken. And thanks to the advocacy of Liz Cohen, Ricardo Roig, and a number of others, we will establish an Arts Council to ensure the successful deployment of these resources.

Earlier, I spoke about a goal of creating smart urban-living in Hoboken. A big part of that is making sure that we are maintaining and developing new parks and open space across our Mile Square. In 2018, we initiated the construction of two new dog parks and are planning for upgrades in Stevens Park, Church Square Park, Elysian Park, and a total rebuild of Madison Street Park. Over the next year, we'll also look to finalize plans for doubling the size of our current Southwest Park.

On top of all of that, in 2019, I hope to approve plans for a Special Needs and Inclusive park with the support of Councilman Michael Russo, Councilwoman Emily Jabbour, Board of Education member Sheillah Dallara, and advocate Megan Yavoich. We will be working together to incorporate inclusive elements into the current rehabilitation of Madison Street Park and plans for the Northwest Resiliency Park.

Perhaps most exciting, we've made significant progress to finalizing the design of our six-acre Northwest Resiliency Park and will break ground on the park in 2019. This will be Hoboken's largest park and Hoboken's own "Central Park." This park will not only be a great place for family and friends to get together, it will also hold up to 2 million gallons of stormwater to alleviate flooding during rain storms through a state-of-the-art underground detention system, and above ground green infrastructure. When completed, the Northwest Park will be a national model for offering modern park features and open space along with innovative flood infrastructure that will make our City more resilient for the future.

We will continue this "Parks as Defense" strategy to protect against rainfall flooding for all new park projects, including an expanded Southwest Park. Our park at 7th and Jackson also has flood detention capabilities and will be able to withhold nearly half a million gallons of water during rain storms, and I look forward to it opening later this year.

The next piece of open space that is critical for so many reasons is the Union Dry Dock property. This issue has been at the forefront of my administration from day one. Last year, hundreds of residents loaded onto buses and drove out to New Jersey Transit's Headquarters in Newark to put a stop to the Christie Administration's attempt to subvert Hoboken's claim to the property.

Since that day, my administration has worked in lockstep with community groups like Fund for a Better Waterfront and Hoboken Residents for a Public Waterfront to demonstrate to Governor Murphy that this property should be utilized as a publicly-accessible waterfront park, and not for the purpose of lining a private corporation's wallet. We all know how critical it is to complete our waterfront and maintain the integrity of our environment, because we live it, first hand. Working with Governor Murphy, who has been a champion at protecting coastal communities from threats including offshore drilling, I know we can find a resolution that protects our waterfront.

While our beautiful waterfront is what makes Hoboken special, it brings along several challenges. Make no mistake about it. Despite what you might hear from the White House, climate change poses an enormous threat to our future. The steps we take now will define Hoboken's future for generations to come.

Fortunately, Hoboken has built a strong foundation for our environmental future. Thanks to our ongoing sustainability efforts including flood mitigation, energy efficiency, alternative transportation options, and more, I'm proud to announce tonight that Hoboken is the first City in New Jersey to be certified as a LEED Gold City by the US Green Building Council. This prestigious recognition validates that Hoboken is a true leader in putting our environment first. But, it's clear we can, and we must do more.

Tonight, I'm announcing the framework of Hoboken's Climate Action Plan, a green initiative that will allow our City to combat climate change. This action plan includes purchasing renewable energy for municipal facilities, energy efficiency upgrades in buildings across Hoboken, the implementation of electric charging stations in City garages, phasing in hybrid-electric vehicles in our City's municipal fleet, and more. Our Climate Action Plan aims for Hoboken's municipal operations to become net zero by 2025 and carbon neutral by 2035, and for the City as a whole, to become net zero by 2030 and carbon neutral by 2050, with these standards exceeding the goals of the Paris Climate Agreement.

We are also making important strides in advancing our historic \$230 Million Rebuild by Design flood protection project, with the continued support of former Mayor Dawn Zimmer. I want to recognize Mayor Zimmer for all she has done in the aftermath of Superstorm Sandy to make our City more resilient, and I am appreciative she remains involved as chair of the Rebuild by Design Citizens Advisory Group. Mayor Zimmer, on behalf of a grateful City, thank you.

As I am sure you've heard from Mayor Zimmer before, Rebuild by Design's flood protection does not mean big, ugly seawalls will be installed in our City. To resist storm surge from the Hudson River, flood protection will be incorporated into amenities our

community can enjoy, including a new and expanded park at Harborside Cove. I invite our community to join us at the upcoming Rebuild by Design Harborside Park meetings on February 4 and 7, and help us implement Rebuild by Design through feedback on what you want the park to look like.

And while we're hard at work protecting from threats of climate change, right here on the ground, day in and day out, Hoboken's Police Department, under the leadership of Police Chief Ken Ferrante, is hard at work keeping our residents safe from crime. Thanks to the work of our officers, total crime is down almost 18%, with major decreases in 11 categories including robbery, burglary, larceny, and both violent and non-violent crimes. In 2018, we had zero homicides. In other words, thanks to the hard work of the Hoboken Police Department, Hoboken is a much safer place to live than in years past.

This past year, I was proud to appoint Brian Crimmins as our new Hoboken Fire Chief, and his team has made tremendous strides including the promotion of the first female fire inspector in Hoboken's history, Dana Mulvaney. Response times to fires and emergencies are getting faster and faster thanks to the leadership of Chief Crimmins, who has also been a trailblazer in integrating our energy efficiency initiatives into the operations of Hoboken Fire Department. Thank you to Chief Crimmins and the department for also demonstrating compassion and diligence by initiating autism awareness training for first responders.

Ladies and gentlemen, the State of our City is strong, and our City's future is bright. We're making major investments in our infrastructure, improving the safety of our streets, and adding more open space. Families, young adults, and our seniors are seeing the benefits of the quality of life improvements we are making every, single, day. Hoboken is the place we're all fortunate to call home. I love this city with all of my heart. I am proud of our city. And I am so excited for the journey ahead of us.

I want to close with the story of someone many in this room know, longtime Hoboken resident Jack Silbert. In 2016, Jack was living what we might describe as a "normal" life

in Hoboken, like many of us. He ran 5k races, had a passion for the local music scene, wrote about indie music, and enjoyed time out with his friends at our local bars. Unfortunately, tragedy struck for Jack, when his two legs were amputated below the knee due to health complications. Soon after, Jack understandably suffered from depression. But, after a while, Jack started focusing on the things he could change, as opposed to the things he couldn't.

Jack now runs an inspirational program in Hoboken called "Don't dis - disabilities" where he talks to children about the importance of understanding people for the quality of their character, and not through visible differences. Like Satya, Jack took life into his own hands, triumphed over his tragedy, and is now making our world a more accepting place. Jack, thank you for all you do for Hoboken.

Finally, I want to thank my family, including my wife, Bindya, and my kids, Arza & Shabegh, for always being by my side, no matter what. Being Mayor often times means late nights and early mornings and I appreciate that they have been willing to share me with the rest of my Hoboken family.

Thank you to everyone for coming tonight. My door is always open and my phone is always on. Give me a call, send me an email, set up a meeting with me and let's get working on our goals together. Thank you.