**Mayor Miro Weinberger's State of the City Address** - April 2, 2018

Good evening and welcome to Contois Auditorium for our annual celebration of democratic renewal and reflection on the well-being of Burlington, Vermont, a city of opportunity. I am very grateful to the people of this city for the chance tonight to take the oath of office for a third time. I will work very hard for the next three years to make good on the trust you have placed in me.

Thank you to Attorney General TJ Donovan for being part of this ceremony. Burlington is proud to have one of its own sons leading the State on immigration and law enforcement issues. I am grateful for your partnership on the opioid crisis and the adoption of 21stCentury policing practices.

Thank you Governor Phil Scott for joining us tonight. Much of the work we do in this room and in this City is impacted by the debates and actions in Montpelier. I want to thank you for your leadership on housing affordability and efforts to address the opioid crisis. I also want to thank you for looking anew at the need for common sense gun reform here in Vermont. The courage and resolve to respond to events and change policy direction when needed is rare in American politics. The people of Burlington see and welcome your bravery on common sense gun reform – thank you for taking action to make Vermont safer for our police officers, domestic violence victims, and most importantly, our children!

The Governor doesn’t work alone in Montpelier. I also want to thank all of the State reps and Senators in the room today - it would be great if you could stand and be recognized.

Thank you Mayor Peter Clavelle and Betsy Ferries and Mayor Frank Cain and Mary Jane Cain for being here tonight and, moreover, for the years of service and sacrifice that you all have given and continue to give to the people of Burlington.

Thank you Mrs. Hartnett for joining us tonight with many other member of your family. Mrs. Hartnett has lived on Brookes Ave for 55 years, and volunteered for 25 years at the polls. Mrs. Hartnett, you have our respect not only because you’ve given so much to the City, and not only because you raised eight children here in Burlington, but also because you are the only person in this room who can keep Councilor Dave Hartnett in line.

General Stephen Cray and Lisa Cray, thank you for being here tonight and for all that you do to keep us safe, and to build the relationship between Vermont’s outstanding National Guard and the Burlington community.

I would like to ask our incredible team of Department Heads and the team from the Mayor’s Office to rise and be recognized for their outstanding work – it is one of the joys of this job that I get to work day in and out with such a fine group of colleagues.

I want to congratulate the recently re-elected City Councilors: Sharon Bushor, Ali Dieng, Chip Mason, Karen Paul, Adam Roof, Max Tracy, and Kurt Wright, and welcome back Brian Pine, who last sat at this table in 1995. I also want to recognize Councilors Richard Deane, Dave Hartnett, Jane Knodell, and Joan Shannon. I hope – and I will do my part to ensure – that our work together over the next year will be marked by the same principled debate, collaboration, and productivity that has defined our efforts for so much of the last six years.

Finally, I want to thank my parents Michael and Ethel for being here tonight, and for all your love, support, and good teachings over the years. And to my wonderful life partner Stacy, thank you. It would be impossible to do this job without your love, support, patience, and considerable sacrifice, and without the support of our wonderful girls, Li Lin and Ada.

I would like to start my report on the State of the City with some great news. The asphalt plants are about to open!

And with the Council and the voters’ support for millions of dollars of bonding, work will begin next week on more than five miles of paving that will be completed this season, including repairs of all the major arterials that were damaged so badly this winter.

The fact that we will be able to respond to a difficult winter so comprehensively is a function of our growing strength as a City in the areas that we have focused on together for the last six years: our municipal finances, downtown economic development and improving the City’s core infrastructure that supports our quality of life and economy.

In the last year, we secured another credit rating upgrade that will help save residents millions of dollars in the years ahead and keep this community more affordable. Fiscal responsibility is the foundation on which all of our successes, ambitious projects, and vision for the future are built.

Over the past 12 months, we rehabilitated and improved another three miles of our treasured Bike Path, and completed the first of five years of major investments in our streets, sidewalks, parks, and water lines.

We have broken ground on one of largest public-private investments in City history. Already, this project has created new contracts for dozens of local firms, and CEDO, the Department of Labor, and ReSource will be sharing more about their collaborative job-training and business resiliency efforts in the weeks ahead. When built, the City Place Burlington project will reduce our carbon footprint, create hundreds of new high-wage jobs, and reconnect the Old North End to the downtown.

And, after a difficult debate within this chamber, we acted with broad consensus to resolve the future of Burlington Telecom in a manner that protects taxpayers, secures enduring public benefits, and ensures that Burlingtonians – unlike a majority of Americans – will have high speed internet choice for generations to come.

**While we are seeing progress on these initiatives and many more, the events of the last year, including the elections here on Town Meeting Day a month ago, have made plain that our community’s work towards a more just future is not done.**

As in many successful American cities today, there are deep concerns within our community about the rising cost of housing pushing low and middle-income households out of Burlington, and frustration that this problem is not being addressed quickly or effectively enough. Some of our neighbors desire more and different City engagement. We have major unmet child care needs as a city, and we continue to grapple with how best to treat those struggling with opioid addictions.

These challenges come at a time when the federal government is in a period of great uncertainty and failing to meet its fundamental responsibilities of addressing climate change, gun violence, immigration reform, and racial equality. Such national failures mean that we in Burlington must continue to step forward and lead at the local level. We can and we will provide this leadership.

**In 2018, the State of the City of Burlington is very strong. And it will grow even stronger in the year ahead as we work to ensure that all of our residents benefit from our recent progress and have a voice in our future direction.**Though we have much to be proud of as a community, we still have much work to do to become the welcoming, equitable, and sustainable City we aspire to be.

Over the next year, that work will include progress and new efforts in five areas that I will detail tonight:

* Collecting and analyzing data on City equity initiatives;
* Working to turn the tide of the opioid crisis;
* Continuing to build our Early Learning Initiative;
* Taking our next steps towards becoming a net zero energy city; and
* Strengthening our public engagement efforts.

I will then conclude with some thoughts on the link between these efforts to make Burlington more equitable, sustainable, and welcoming and our downtown housing and land use policies.

For the last year and a half, City employees have been meeting monthly for BTV Stat meetings – our data collection and analysis effort that attempts to measure and track the results achieved by City departments. **To ensure that our City government is properly oriented towards achieving progress for all members of our community, in the year ahead we will be focusing BTV Stat on equity.** I have asked our Department Heads and the Chief Innovation Officer to begin measuring each department’s performance against new equity goals, and to track this data on our public dashboard.

In addition, these statistics will be collected and analyzed in an annual Equity Report that will be published as part of the City’s traditional Annual Report starting next Town Meeting Day.

**Nowhere is our work more urgent and nowhere is there more at stake than in our efforts to turn the tide of the opioid crisis.** It has been four years since Governor Peter Shumlin focused the nation on this epidemic, and yet, in 2017 again the death count attributable to accidental opioid overdoses continued to rise nationally and in Vermont. More Americans now die every year as a result of accidental drug overdoses than were killed in the entirety of the Vietnam War.

Too many of those deaths continue to happen right here in Chittenden County. Since last August, we have lost 13 of our neighbors to this terrible scourge. One of those lost was Sean Blake, age 27. Sean’s parents Kim and Tim, a doctor at the University of Vermont Medical Center and a professor at St. Michael’s, live just minutes from here in South Burlington. They wanted me to share Sean’s story this evening, as they did in this same room in February as part of the monthly Community Stat meeting Burlington convenes so that the region’s law enforcement, medical, treatment, and social service agencies can grapple with the challenges this crisis poses. The Blakes shared their son’s story in the hope that we can, as a community, learn from it.

Sean grew up here and loved the lake and mountains. He was bright, creative and active in theater and athletics. As a young man he struggled with bipolar disorder and addiction and he had an adulthood marked by dramatic rises and falls. After a brief stint in the Navy, Sean’s addiction dragged him downward to the point that he was incarcerated at Riker’s Island in New York City. There, his life started to turn for the better, as he received mental health treatment, and medicine to treat his addiction. He returned to Vermont with these supports in place, and did well until going off these medications. When he went off treatment, he returned to prison here in Vermont, where the medicine was unavailable. Just over a month after he was released last year, he overdosed and died. The Blakes couldn’t be here tonight because they are attending a memorial service for their son in Buffalo.

Vermont prisons have been among the leaders in the country in creating opportunities for opioid treatment. Yet as Sean’s story shows, we still have work to do. One of the most important bills before the legislature this year is S.166, which would continue to expand treatment options for people in Vermont’s prisons. The City strongly supports its passage as a life-saving piece of legislation and believes it will be an important step forward in this fight.

But expanding access to treatment in prisons is only one needed step. In the year ahead, we must dramatically expand access to medications that could help save lives. **Burlington is proposing that we move towards having a system where a health professional prescribes methadone or buprenorphine to opioid addicted patients at the time patients are ready to accept treatment – increasing their chances of freeing themselves from the grip of this terrible addiction.**

That is not the system we have today. Currently patients have to wait an average of 17 days between the request for treatment and when they receive their first prescription from the hub in Chittenden County. We should take advantage of every opportunity – every moment when someone is ready for treatment to start their medication - rather than telling them to wait until Monday, or to wait until next week, or the week after that, knowing that to stave off withdrawal, that patient will likely use illicit drugs multiple times, maybe even dozens of times, before treatment becomes available, and the opportunity for a better path will be gone.

This approach is guided by the emerging, hopeful body of evidence that rapid access to these medications saves lives. For example, a randomized study in Connecticut found twice the rate of success in treatment when overdose patients were offered buprenorphine*right in* the Emergency Room. To apply this evidence in Burlington, we’re working with experts at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, and elsewhere.

One longtime staff member of Safe Recovery, our syringe exchange, told me that in more than a decade on the job, she has seen so many moments of interest in treatment appear, only to slip away for good.

No more. **Our goal for the year ahead – which we are pursuing with partners at the UVM Medical Center and the Howard Center – will be to improve rapid access to medication in order to start effective care at the right place and at the right moment to save lives.**

I want to thank the Burlington Police Department and Burlington Fire Department and their chiefs for leading the way and taking on new roles and responsibilities in response to this crisis while at the same time continuing to meet the public’s very high expectations in all other areas of public safety.

**In 2018 we will bring this same focus on innovation and results to grow the new Burlington Early Learning Initiative.**While we had conducted extensive research when you, the City Council, approved the first allocation of City funds for this effort last July, with that commitment the City stepped into a new area where we had little precedent locally or nationally to look to. What we did have is clarity that hundreds of our youngest Burlington toddlers and infants were not getting the high-quality child care they deserved and a shared intent to take action to address this challenge.

Infant and toddler child care is a major equity issue. When kids do not access high-quality care during this critical time, they start pre-K and Kindergarten already behind, and too many of these kids then struggle to ever catch up.

Nine months after the program was created, it is starting to make an impact on the ground. Together last week we made our first grant to a center that will create four much-needed, new Burlington infant and toddler child care slots. In the weeks and months ahead, I look forward to working with the Council and the new Community Development and Neighborhood Revitalization Committee to finalize our next round of grant requests, shape the new program’s strategy for its second year, and set a path for securing new partners and funding that will expand the impact of this initiative throughout the City.

**Also in 2018, we will continue to work towards becoming a net zero energy city, with continued focus on the district energy project.**This project represents perhaps the single biggest emission reduction action we can take as a community. Burlington Electric has been leading a unique partnership that would move the project to the advanced engineering and design phase and put us in position to resolve the feasibility of the effort by the end of the calendar year. I also appreciate very much the support of our Chittenden County legislators in successfully moving forward legislation that would allow Burlington Electric to access over $1 million in thermal energy incentives to apply to district energy, taking the project one step closer to reality last week.

**While the City pursues this and other critical work, we must continue to communicate and engage the public fully. We excel at public engagement as a community in many ways – and we can do even better.**

Over the next year, we will complete three important improvements.

**First, we will complete and bring to Council for approval the City’s first Language Access Plan.** Our City is growing and welcoming English-language learners into our neighborhoods every day, and we must be thoughtful and consistent in how we address language barriers that impact city services.

**Second, we will bring to the Council for discussion and approval a new public engagement handbook to guide our efforts to forward and improve City initiatives.**

**Finally, as proposed by others in the recent campaigns and consistent with a resolution that Councilor Karen Paul has proposed to the administration, we will work to review the role and responsibilities of the Neighborhood Planning Assemblies, and how the processes by which City Departments work with the NPAs and other stakeholders in our community can be improved.**

**These initiatives will do much to make our community more equitable, sustainable, and welcoming.  They will ultimately only succeed, however, if we get the fundamentals right and fully fix our downtown housing and land use policies.** Growing, dynamic, evolving cities have room and opportunities for people of all backgrounds, incomes, and ages.  Compact, dense, walkable, and bikeable cities are also the most sustainable communities, as residents consume far less energy heating and cooling their homes and workplaces, and drive far less than their suburban and rural contemporaries.

In contrast, communities that put up regulatory walls to stop change lock in some of their physical character, but they lose their community’s soul in the bargain. Young households and the middle class are pushed out by rising demand, and older, wealthier households, while low income households, refugees, and others seeking opportunity are blocked from ever getting in the door.

This is the future we were headed towards six years ago. We had created only a couple hundred downtown homes over the prior decade despite mounting demand. Younger households were being forced out of the downtown in that period as the average Burlington rent climbed to 44 percent of median income.

Over the last six years, the Council and the voters have repeatedly taken action to open up new opportunities with our downtown development policies and we are now on a different trajectory. Since 2013, more than 1,200 downtown homes have been built or are in the construction pipeline. This effort is starting to work – vacancy rates are edging upwards, and landlords are reporting new price and quality pressure as they seek tenants, and this is happening even before the first of the major new downtown projects opens at Champlain College’s 194 St. Paul Street this fall.

This work, however, is not done. At front doors and coffee tables around the City this winter, the cost of housing continued to be the most urgent problem on the minds of our voters. Young couples told me they were on the verge of moving out of the City or even out of State for rent relief. Retirees described years of frustrated searches for downtown apartments near their grandchildren. Students turned out in very high numbers this Town Meeting Day in large part because they are demanding better living conditions.

In short, we have more to do to work our way out of the affordable housing crisis. On March 6, after much debate, the City voted to keep moving forward with this work. **In the year ahead we must bring new resources to our local Housing Trust Fund, and get our parking, affordable housing, student housing, and other local land use policies right.**

This work is difficult and will continue to require focus and commitment. When we get it done, however, we will ensure that Burlington will remain in the decades ahead what it has been throughout its 150-year history: Vermont’s city of opportunity, where all are welcome to start a career or a business, where people of all backgrounds can buy a home and start a family, and where Burlingtonians of all ages thrive.

Thank you all for being part of this important annual tradition. I am excited and eager to take on the challenges of the next year together. Let’s get back to work and let’s have a great 2018!