

MAYOR PAUL E COOGAN  
CITY OF FALL RIVER STATE OF THE CITY ADDRESS  
MARCH 9TH, 5:30PM

Good evening. Honorable members of the council, school committee and citizens of Fall River, it is an honor to be with you as I deliver the 2021 State of the City address.

As is typical of my administration so far, this is still an unusual Address. First, because I am speaking to a limited group of people and I am only able to share this ceremonial event with our residents virtually. Secondly, this is an unusual address because I delivered a speech very similar to this only four months ago.

That is because, less than a week before my first State of the City address last March, we had to reschedule. It is quite symbolic of my term as Mayor. Much like that speech, many of my plans were quickly rescheduled and reprioritized.

I spent a lot of my address in November discussing Covid-19- what we did to curb the virus and support our hospitals, nursing homes and businesses in the early days. I would like to repeat what I said then- I am incredibly proud of the way that Fall River has come together in the face of the pandemic. Our rich history as a mill city proved to be an asset to us. Our local manufacturers showed impressive adaptability as they became some of the largest domestic producers of PPE, and they made sure to give back to our City.

Our service providers stepped up in a big way, shifting gears to make sure families were fed and our children were taken care of.

Fall River has not one but two hospitals and no shortage of medical offices. I cannot give enough credit to the doctors, nurses and medical staff who pushed on through this pandemic. Not to mention our teachers, essential workers and public safety team who kept our world turning despite all of the uncertainty and the changes that came their way. I would like to pause and take a moment to really and truly thank them.

While last year we were focused on masks, shut downs, and social distancing, we have quickly changed our focus to vaccines. Vaccines have always been our way out of this. When December came around and vaccines were finally ready to be rolled out, our administration and state delegation kicked into high gear. At the request of the State, our very own Health Department launched a clinic at Bristol Community College with the help of our Fire Department and EMS. It was a fantastic collaborative effort,

starting with a small first responders clinic that grew into a well oiled machine that could vaccinate hundreds of people daily.

When Southcoast Health rose to the challenge and chose to open a vaccine site, they narrowed in on the function hall at the Liberal Club. What is normally a staple for weddings and fundraisers is now an impressive vaccination site in the South End.

We also supported another partnership between the Fall River Housing Authority, HealthFirst and our EMS to bring mobile vaccine sites to Housing Authority Senior living complexes. This way, we were able to eliminate some transportation issues that may have otherwise been a barrier to getting the vaccine for some of our residents.

Unfortunately, we have constantly been limited by a national vaccine shortage.

But that hasn't stopped my administration and our state delegation from continuing to lobby everyone from Beacon Hill to Capitol Hill to make sure Fall River gets its fair share of doses.

I wanted to take a moment today to share a hopeful story about what vaccines have meant to our community.

### ***IMPROV STORY ABOUT VACCINE SITES- woman***

However, vaccines didn't come soon enough for far too many of our residents. Early on in this pandemic, our nursing homes were almost like warzones. Their staff often fought to keep our residents safe from this virus, but they could not save everyone. Sadly, we have lost 331 of our residents, both in and out of our nursing homes. Many of these residents passed away in very distressing circumstances, where loved ones may not have been able to say goodbye. My heart goes out to those affected and I would like to take a moment of silence for the lives lost to covid-19.

### ***PAUSE for a moment of silence.***

We are working to plan a fitting tribute to all of our victims later this year.

There is no denying the impact that this virus has had on all of us. We have a lot of work to do to recover- to get our students back in the classroom, to revive the arts and our cultural events, to support our businesses as they return to normal, to bring lost jobs back and to ensure that families can survive through these difficult times.

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Before I get too far along in this speech, I want to acknowledge the team who got our City, and myself, through the darkest days of 2020. It truly takes a village, and I could not do my job without these people.

I'd like to take a moment to acknowledge:

- Our federal delegation,
  - Senators Markey and Warren
  - Representatives Keating and Auchincloss, as well as former Representative Joseph Kennedy
- . State Senator Mike Rodriques
- . Our State Representatives Carole Fiola, Alan Silvia and Paul Schmid
- . The president and members of the City Council
- . The members of the school committee

We work closely with this group, all of whom are committed to getting things done and making Fall River a better place to live.

Of course, I must thank the City employees who have endured so much, including my department heads and the team who work with me directly every day on the 6th floor- Ann, Jane, Ced, Elaina and Debra. They are the people I turn to every day, and I could not do my job without them.

All these individuals support me in achieving a unified vision for Fall River- a vision where residents are safe, where streets are clean, where we have a vibrant economy with plenty of places to go and things to do.

I also want to thank my wife Judi for all her love and support over this very difficult year.. And, believe me, this job is non-stop. She is my partner and I love her.

Finally, I want to acknowledge the people of Fall River. They have risen to the challenge, they stun me every day. They carry the future of our City on their backs, and they are doing a great job. Residents- you are Fall River's true warriors, surviving a pandemic and many crises. You have my utmost respect.

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Now let's have a go at a proper State of the City address. So today, building on a moment of hope, I would like to spend more time talking about where we are as we prepare for the future. While we still have a long way to go, I am glad to be making the

2021 speech at a more hopeful moment, as we continue vaccinations, getting our kids back to school and reopening the economy.

For nearly my entire term, I have been called a “Covid Mayor”. When the history books look at me in 50 years, I suppose I will be known as the Covid Mayor. However, being mayor of Fall River has been so much more than Covid-19. Despite the pandemic, we were able to accomplish many positive changes for the City of Fall River. We were able to navigate the restrictions of Covid-19 and operate efficiently despite all the challenges. Today, I will be highlighting some of our accomplishments during my first year.

I wanted to break down this address by section, so that we can lay out a transparent, clear discussion of how far we have come, despite the pandemic. There is much to be proud of, much to celebrate, and much to hope for.

***I would like to begin with public safety.***

- We appointed a new Police Chief, Jeff Cardoza .
- In the last year, we saw a dramatic drop in all but two of eight areas of both violent and property related crimes.
- Hired former Boston Police Commissioner Ed Davis to do a performance audit of the FRPD and we expect the report later this month.
- Expanded professional development opportunities for the Fall River Police Department including de-escalation training and conversational Spanish
- Piloting body cameras after successful negotiations with the Police Union. We are getting ready to roll out the cameras for our walking beat first.
- Obtained \$50,000 for neighborhood policing program
- Formed partnership between the school committee and the city to install 20 surveillance cameras, 10 permanent and 10 mobile
- We allocated \$100,000 for turnout gear for Fire Department
- And are finalizing plans for a separate, state of the art building to house our EMS.
- We also Provided the fire department with equipment and a heated tent to run a Covid-19 test site.
- We are currently Exploring opportunities through the SAFER grant to hire 5 additional firemen. We just welcomed 8 new members of the Fire Department two weeks ago.

**As everyone knows, education and our schools have always been close to my heart.**

- Working with the School Committee, we developed plans for the reopening of Fall River Schools through a hybrid model. We also helped to secure funding for Chromebooks and Hot spots to ensure all kids had access to remote learning. I thank Amazon, Verizon and Comcast for giving back to our community and meeting our students' needs.
- Today, we have returned our elementary and middle school students to hybrid learning, with Durfee students returning in the coming weeks.
- We have strengthened City oversight at the new Durfee construction site and are still planning for our fall opening. I truly believe this school will be an asset for generations of students to come.
- We have improved all of our school buildings across the City, not just Durfee. Progress is also being made on the drainage and roads at Talbot Middle School. Henry Lord is working towards getting a second means of egress and plans are also being finalized for something similar at Silvia. Among other projects, our Resiliency Preparatory Academy has improved their handicap accessibility and replaced their roof. Watson also received a new roof and windows and there are a number of ADA renovations in progress.

#### **Looking at our infrastructure...**

- We completed major sidewalk replacement projects all over the City. Two of the biggest projects were at Kennedy and North Parks. Our roads, too, have been improved across the City.
- To continue this work, we eliminated the Streetscapes program and transferred the funding to street and sidewalk repairs- creating a fund of close to \$5 million.
- It was a goal of my administration to make sure that no developers or contractors were taking advantage of our City. Our Planning and Engineering departments have been diligent in their oversight of any new developments along with reviewing those already in existence.
- We worked alongside Fall River's state delegation to obtain a \$1million grant for the Flint which will make a huge difference in tackling beautification and rehabilitation on Pleasant Street
- We are currently transitioning to parking kiosks that will have the ability to take credit cards as a way to simplify downtown parking.
- We have made improvements to a number of parks. The CDA has been leading several projects, including the renovation of the Aetna St Park (now dedicated as Paul Puolos Park) and we have also made upgrades to Chew Park. Plans have been established for the rehabilitation of Desmarais playground as well as the Cathy Assad tot lot.

**One of my priorities is improving the quality of life in Fall River.**

- While Covid did make it nearly impossible to hold events, we managed to provide a few safe activities for our families
- Over the summer, We organized several Drive-in Movies at Durfee to provide residents with outdoor recreation.
- In December, we kept holiday traditions alive with Santa's rolling parade. I am grateful to the team at Re-Creation for their hard work in helping us find a unique way to celebrate.
- We also worked with Fall River Government Television and the Narrows to bring the Sons of Serendip in for a live holiday concert which was broadcast into homes across the SouthCoast, showing the region what Fall River has to offer. I thank BayCoast Bank for sponsoring the event.
- Most recently, we have helped the Fall River Arts and Culture coalition create the Winterbridge at Gromada Plaza to provide some safe outdoor activities for Fall River families.
- In May, we will be dedicating the Vietnam Memorial Wall at Bicentennial Park. We also recently renamed the Veterans Center on Pine Street in honor of Kenneth J Boyer.

**Another key part of improving quality of life is prioritizing health, wellness and social services.**

- We strengthened our Department of Public Health by transferring a clerk and replacing her with another RN, which was crucial during the busiest days of the pandemic.
- We reorganized Mayor's Opioid Task Force under the title of the Fall River Substance Abuse Task Force, which we hope to ramp up as Covid wanes.
- Created a successful new street outreach program, embedded in the Police Department, to help non-offending drug users access treatment and to assist our homeless population in finding the support they need. These specialists have done an amazing job getting people the services they desperately need.
- Established Fall River's first permanent overflow shelter for the homeless at Solomon's Porch on Bay St, which is a tremendous asset to our city, and we have provided additional funding for Steppingstone and the First Step Inn.
- Another priority of mine has been caring for our veterans. Last year, we combined CARES Act funding and Office of Veterans Services funding to provide \$100,000 to the VABC for a job training program for veterans

- Together with the CDA, we also renovated a property at 32 Bradford Avenue into 3 units of veterans housing, with more to follow. We did so by reinstituting the Building Blocks program, which has allowed us to make plans to rehabilitate many vacant and abandoned properties across the City- keeping our neighborhoods safe and getting homes back on the tax roll.

**Good Government allows the City to function at its full potential.**

- Eliminated unnecessary City boards and combined positions in Government Center to save taxpayer money.
- Strengthening our online and off site payment options. We collaborated with BayCoast Bank to allow residents to pay City bills off site, which has been a very helpful partnership.
- We utilized grant funding to provide ADA renovations to the City Council Chambers and City Council hearings room.
- We instituted a City vehicle policy to reduce the personal use of city owned vehicles
- We created a new joint position in partnership with the Fall River Housing Authority and the CDA, the Minority Outreach Coordinator.
- We established Fall River's first ever Diversity Committee.
- We hired a hearings officer and re-established municipal hearings to address litter enforcement and minimum housing violations.
- We joined with one of our partners, UMass, to bring Law interns to assist with abandoned properties and other legal issues.

**Now onto City finances...**

- We presently have 2.2 million dollars in our free cash account.
- On January 1st of 2020, our Stabilization fund was around 7 and a half million dollars - it is currently well over 9 million dollars
- Last year, after 3 months of month-to-month budgets my budget was presented to the City Council and approved.
- Working with our finance team, the City is still on track financially to meet the Fiscal Year 2021 budget projection.
- Working with the insurance advisory committee and the public employee committee, we developed a cost saving strategy by moving some of our retirees to Medicare and Medex- saving the City health insurance costs and providing our retirees with additional benefits.
- We continue to work with the City Council and school committee to meet 100% of Net school spending.

- In February of 2021 we worked with Massachusetts Financial Oversight Board and sold bonds at one of the lowest rates in our City's history
- The City's allocation of CARES monies was nearly 8 million dollars - the City continues to work with departments to best utilize our remaining funds.
- We continue to negotiate with the City's unions to provide fair and equitable contracts.

### **Which brings us to economic development.**

- I want you all to know- the City of Fall River is seeing a boom in our local real estate market. Many residential properties are selling as soon as they hit the market, for over asking price. Many overlooked properties in all corners of the City are being repurposed as market rate housing developments.
- Thanks in part to local developers like Anthony Cordeiro, Robert Karam and Alan Macomber, we have a number of active project across the City.
- Some examples include the Downtown Lofts at the Ben and Nathan building on Third Street and the Residences at Highland Avenue (which was formerly the Adams House). Plans are in the works to repurpose the Notre Dame Rectory and the International Garment Workers Union building for market rate and workforce housing. Mills on Alden St and Globe Mills Avenue are being renovated as well. These are just a few examples of recent and ongoing housing developments in Fall River.
- We are nearing the end of a long journey supporting the Bank St Armory's sale and rehabilitation. We have state approval to make the sale and are currently drawing up the purchase and sale agreement. The developer plans to make the Armory into a venue for events like weddings and fairs, which we hope will bring more action to downtown.
- We've obtained a \$1 Million grant from Seaport Council for Phase 2 of City Pier, which will make the pier safe for public use. The RDA is in the process of achieving this next phase of rehabilitation.
- Because of the ongoing developments at the waterfront and the incoming Commuter rail, the Waterfront is seeing heightened interest from commercial and residential mixed use developers. A new six story building on Davol street is being developed for 49 market rate units with commercial space on the first floor.
- The South Coast Rail project, which has driven much of the renewed interest in the City, is moving along and is set for completion by 2023.



- In our North End, the City has worked together with the redevelopment authority to solidify the expansion of Raw Seafood in the Industrial Park and facilitate Nantucket Seafood as a tenant
- We also worked with Liberty Utilities to relocate them to the industrial park, also, in the former Homeland building and assisted in the sale of their property on Anawan st to the RDA
- The City has worked to support the expansion of existing businesses such as US Mattress, who are moving to the former Sam's Club site late this Spring, bringing over a hundred new jobs to Fall River.
- The CDA, RDA and Bristol County Economic Development consultants assisted with the allocation of \$1.2 million dollars of CARES Act funding to support small and medium sized businesses with both job creation and retention.
- We have worked with the TDI Partnership and One Southcoast Chamber to promote Outdoor dining. By utilizing grant funding, the City distributed heaters to extend the outdoor dining season for our restaurants. We have plans to continue supporting restaurants as we approach the Spring.

As we begin the second year of the Coogan administration, we will be focused on the following priorities, which I believe will help move the City of Fall River towards meeting its full potential.

1. I want to make visible progress in revitalizing our downtown and Pleasant street commercial districts by adding market rate housing and supporting mixed use development while improving and filling vacant storefronts. I would like to return to the days of a bustling downtown with plenty of foot traffic.
2. As we look to another round of federal stimulus funding, I want to use these funds for streets, sidewalks and infrastructure projects.
3. I want to improve the liveability of the City by supporting our arts and cultural economy through the revitalization of the Bank Street Armory, the improvements to the Durfee auditorium and the growth of our waterfront cultural district. I also look forward to planning and supporting community events as soon as we can do so.

Almost every choice I make as Mayor works towards these goals.

I ran my campaign with a vision. A vision of a City government where everyone feels included. I had a vision of providing residents easy access to this building, to my office and to myself. But Covid-19 has changed that. Not only has it consumed much of my time here, but it has restricted me from doing what I love most, what drove me to this office. It has restricted me from being with all of you. We are no longer holding

cookouts, clam boils or chow mein sandwich luncheons. I can't drop in on fundraisers or classrooms. Visitation at City Hall has been restricted to essential services for customers.

I believe that in the last year, while we were all isolated and lived our lives online, we lost touch with the hope and unity that the City felt in early 2020. I have seen a troubling trend of residents turning to patterns of distrust, disrespect and division. It is so easy to villainize and hate, especially when, in recent history, we have had leaders fail us and embarrass us on a national and local scale.

But when I have a moment to message someone who leaves an aggressive comment on my page or when I bump into someone at the grocery store and they ask me about something that confused them or upset them, we try to reach an understanding. I believe, when people escape the confines of the internet and interact as we were meant to (with humanity, respect and understanding), they remember the hope that this City felt in January of last year. They remember why I was elected, they remember that my love for this City and my urge to do what is right for Fall River guides everything that I do.

Far too often, hate and mistrust clouds our judgement. My biggest fear is that if we give into these things, instead of coming to an understanding and treating people with respect and trust, we will remain in a pattern of negativity that as a City need to escape.

So as I close my statement tonight and as we come together to look for a more normal future, I want to make this message very, very clear. I urge you all to trust in a brighter tomorrow for Fall River and to treat others with dignity and respect.

I hope you still raise your voices and share your opinions, even if they are not positive towards me. But I urge you to do so thoughtfully and to seek the truth instead of only seeking the negative.

As we go forward, I once again promise you that I will continue to work hard, act out of my deep love for this City and commit my administration to integrity and transparency. We are on the cusp of something really special in Fall River and I am very excited about what the future is going to bring.

Good night and god bless the City of Fall River.