

State of the City Address 2021
Remarks as Prepared for Delivery
Mayor W. Reed Gusciora

Good evening, Trentonians and friends of the Capital City! Thank you so much for joining us tonight, both in-person here in City Council chambers, or with friends and loved ones at home.

Tonight reminds us that we have little more than a year left in our terms of office, and it is my intention to recap our accomplishments during the last year and outline the promises for our remaining time in office.

Even with all that we've achieved, there is so much more that can be done. We need to unite for the betterment of the City. Our residents want results – they do not want the acrimony and dissension that often percolates throughout City Hall.

There is, of course, blame to go around, and I'll accept my share of it. The buck stops here, but I am more than willing to sit down - as the offer has been made many times - and determine how best to allocate our time to benefit the residents of this City.

We *did* all come together to celebrate the victory of Trenton High School Alum Athing Mu this summer. Many of us have never seen the city as united as it was when she came home to celebrate her Olympic gold medals from Tokyo. Even Council President McBride mentioned to me that day, "Today we are united. We can go back to fighting tomorrow."

But let's continue to nurture that spirit of unity, celebrate Trenton's other successes this year, and plan for the days ahead.

The American Rescue Plan

I want to start by discussing the American Rescue Plan. We're grateful that the Biden Administration, along with our federal representatives in Congress led by Bonnie Watson-Coleman, helped us secure an unprecedented \$73 million in American Rescue Plan. *That is a truly incredible sum considering that our annual budget is \$220 million.*

I've already laid out my spending plan for the first half of the \$73 million and sent it to Council for their consideration. **The public can review the plan and offer their input at www.TalkTrenton.org.**

Some of our proposals include programs that have stalled due to lack of funding. This includes modernizing our outdated police radio system; upgrading our parks, libraries, and community centers; and repairing our water mains.

We were also able to address our COVID-19 budget shortfalls. We used \$7 million in rescue funds to balance our budget **without any local property tax increase.**

We can also expand critical services using rescue funds, including setting aside nearly \$2 million for expanded mental health counseling. Residents who have lost family members to gun violence or even COVID-19 will soon be able to take advantage of crisis counselors managed by our health department.

In addition, we've used rescue funds to help essential city employees who worked throughout the pandemic, many of whom became ill due to Covid exposure on the job.

This plan is a *living document*. It's flexible enough to incorporate public feedback or other emergent needs, and I encourage our residents to continue to provide us your ideas and perspective.

Public Safety

Public Safety has been extremely challenging this year. Across the country, cities large and small have seen a rise in gun violence. Trenton is no exception.

I often visit hospitals and the homes of the victims. But that is never enough, and as we know, thoughts and prayers don't recover the lives lost. It's what keeps me up at night. We must continue to make every effort to improve public safety.

We reached out to the State, County and surrounding jurisdictions to help our patrols. We were also pleased to see the State's 3rd Real-Time Crime Center is finally up and running in our city. This facility is *the* primary law enforcement intelligence hub for Trenton. There, federal, state, and local agencies can collect and analyze data. In the long run, this can help prevent future crimes.

Based on this intelligence, Director Wilson is assigning more officers to target violent crime offenders in historic hot spots.

And those efforts are clearly paying off – 187 guns, 6,000 grams of cocaine, 42,000 decks of heroin, and more than \$800,000 in suspected illegal funds have been seized this year.

*But we know we can't arrest our way out of crime or settle long-held neighborhood conflicts on our own. **We need the community's involvement.*** If you see a crime, or see something suspicious, please report it to the police.

And we can't urge parents enough, stay involved with your children. Make sure they stay in school. Get them involved in afterschool activities. Know where your children are after 10 pm. Know who they hang out with.

That's why youth engagement is a top priority for me. And when it comes to community policing, no one has offered more helpful input than Councilman Blakely.

For starters, we're working with the Mercer County Prosecutor's Office to expand youth activities. It was heartwarming to visit basketball camps run by former Seton Hall star Bryan Caver and former Harlem Globetrotter LaKeisha Sutton.

The TPD is also bringing back its Citizen's Police Academy. Trentonians in this room and at home can participate in classes about police procedures while getting to know the officers who patrol their neighborhood.

I was also pleased to see the return of the TPD Summer Youth Camp. Dozens of Trenton children had the opportunity to learn about police work and gang awareness training, all while participating in fun field trips in and around the city.

The police are also developing a Trenton Community Street Team program. You might have heard of a similar project that started in Newark under Mayor Ras Baraka. The Newark folks have been helping us put together a similar program here.

Essentially, the program uses outreach workers familiar with the community to intervene in historic and ongoing neighborhood conflicts, prevent retaliation, and provide victim services. These programs have been successful in Newark and we look forward to bringing those positive results here.

Lastly, we need to show everyone that there is an alternative to a life of crime. Breaking the cycle of incarceration that plagues urban neighborhoods is a **social justice, public safety, and community health concern.**

Thankfully, we've made a ton of progress since we announced the creation of our Office of Returning Citizens last year. To date, *our reentry office has processed 100 cases, 54 of which resulted in successful employment for formerly incarcerated individuals.*

Economic Development

There is no doubt that economic development, equal employment opportunities, and reversing urban blight are essential to any public safety program.

That's why Housing Director Andre Daniels is focusing his energies on supporting the businesses that are already here, adding new businesses and bringing developers to the City, all while addressing the large number of vacant properties in our inventory.

Last year, our property auction attracted an unprecedented amount of interest. Many bidders were Trenton residents or first-time buyers.

To ensure that increased interest in Trenton properties benefits residents from all walks of life, we started our First-Time Homeowner Mortgage Program. This service is available to successful bidders on City properties who commit to residing in the auctioned property.

Next week, we are seeking Council's approval for **five of these mortgages** for new homeowners in the City's South Ward. I want to thank Councilman Muschal for helping us identify these properties.

We also ask Council to approve the City's next auction of 93 vacant properties citywide. *This list includes another 10 properties under the first-time homeowner program.*

When I first ran for office, I made a pledge to have 1000 homes in 1000 days. Our measure of success is new Certificates of Occupancy issued by HED. We *were* well on our way to achieving this goal when the Covid pandemic hindered our redevelopment efforts.

Well, I am happy to report we've issued **955 new Certificates of Occupancy since the start of my Administration**. And despite Covid-19, we are still going to get well over 1,000 once our new housing projects are completed.

In the past year, thanks to the Trenton Housing Authority, we saw the completion and full occupancy of Turner Pointe, which replaced the abandoned Page Homes on Calhoun Street with 77 new units.

We'll soon see the completion of Jennings Village, to be named after our Civil Rights Champion, Edith Savage Jennings. This will bring another 72 affordable rental units to a previously vacant lot on Brunswick Avenue.

We also can see construction crews at the abandoned Van Sciver Building on South Broad Street. They're starting an ambitious redevelopment project that is bringing 120 affordable *and market-rate* units to Trenton's downtown.

And in the coming weeks, the completion of the Vessel modular apartment building on Perry Street right next to Reverend Taylor's Church will transform another abandoned lot into six modern apartments.

With these development projects, no one can claim that we are not bringing developers into the City. No one can claim that Trenton is not a good place to do business. What everyone should know is that we will continue to market the City as a great place to live and work. We will continue to find developers and individual homeowners who can help transform the abandoned properties in our inventory into new livable space.

In fact, *I am excited to announce for the first time tonight that there are two proposals to redevelop Roebling Block II.*

From my first day in office, I've tried to get a developer interested in this block of abandoned Roebling factories. Now we have *two* such proposals to revolutionize this area of Chambersburg.

I ask City Council to make this a priority. *Both* Roebling proposals call for mixed-use residential units and a public square for arts and entertainment. If we work together, we can see this jumpstarted before our term ends. Either one would bring jobs, customers and other opportunities to area residents and businesses.

In addition, I recently met with developers inspired by both the famous Wall Street in New York and the historic Black business district community that once thrived in Tulsa,

Oklahoma. Those developers want to bring that vision to our own Wall Street here in Trenton. They want to give entrepreneurs of color the opportunity to cultivate a business district that truly reflects our rich and diverse history. I look forward to bringing this resolution before Council as well. ***Let's put our OWN Wall Street on the map!***

Yet another development plan on the horizon targets the abandoned Clinton Court on North Clinton Avenue that was once a mansion and then an apartment building. The current owners are willing to turn over the dwelling to the City so that we can attract a developer to bring new housing to the block.

We are also working with the State and the Capital City Redevelopment Corporation to transform the abandoned Taxation Building on Barrack Street into a commercial hub for new businesses. Again, this will bring significant opportunities to Trenton's downtown.

I was also happy to attend a public meeting organized by Octavia Sutphen and the Neighborhood Improvement Association about redeveloping the old vacant Mercer Hospital Site. This property has been vacant for far too long, and it's about time we kindle development on that site. I want to thank Councilman Harrison for his support in this effort.

As for our small businesses, I'm especially proud that we secured 38 emergency loans for Trenton businesses. When the final numbers are in, Trenton will have a better business retention rate than other cities in the state that struggled with COVID-19 closures.

Moreover, in the last year we saw 52 new Trenton businesses open, including Royal Cake Creations; Food Bar & Grill; North Side Café; Lucky's Lunchbox; Success Barber Shop; Dylilah's Sweet Sin'Sation; and A Prepared Place Natural Haircare. ***Indeed, Trenton Still Makes Main Street Businesses.***

Don't forget about TerraCycle, a top-100 *Forbes* company that operates in 21 countries but still calls this city home. I'm happy to say that they reaffirmed their commitment to Trenton by buying two vacant city lots to expand their main office.

My Administration also came together with City Council to approve a job creation loan to help Princeton Hydro set up shop in Roebling 3, bringing their headquarters and dozens of employees with them. This historic industrial site – *which has been vacant for over 25 years* - will be transformed into three floors of unique, state-of-the-art office space.

Lastly, we're **incredibly excited** for the future of the cannabis industry here in Trenton. Thankfully, our recent ordinance allows for **10 dispensaries** citywide and permits related businesses to operate in the downtown area. There is *no doubt* that this will pave the way for more jobs, revenue, and traffic to our local restaurants and shops.

Urban Blight

But none of this progress will last until we root out the blight that cripples economic opportunity and weighs down the spirit of our neighborhoods.

I want to take a moment to reflect on a neighborhood tour we did on Stuyvesant Avenue from Parkside to Prospect Street earlier this week. Many of our residents know the area all too well. Here, community groups that offer kids programs and meals sit right across the street from dangerous hangouts. Families *pass lot after lot of awful decay* on their way to work, church or school.

I'm thankful for the Directors who joined me on this tour - Housing Director Daniels, Health Director Lopez, Business Administrator Cruz and Police Director Wilson. We toured the distressed properties. We spoke to as many residents as we could about their experiences. I wanted my team to witness firsthand why addressing urban blight is a top priority of this Administration.

That's why we're bringing as many demolition projects as we can to open up these neighborhoods for critically needed development.

Trenton has over 1000 houses that are vacant or falling apart. None of them produce tax revenue. Instead, they create havens for drug and other criminal activity.

A study in the *American Journal of Public Health* found that abandoned buildings and vacant lots are directly related to an increase in violent crime. That study concluded that urban blight remediation can be a cost-efficient way to significantly reduce gun violence.

But we have to address this problem smartly. We've taken our time to inventory and prioritize target properties.

In the coming weeks, we will put before Council ***31 properties on Sanford Street***, one of the worst blocks in the City, that need to be taken down to make way for new development. Can you ***imagine*** new and safe homes in this neighborhood?

If there is one thing we can all come together and agree on, it's that we must address this crisis. Together we can lift this city from this blight ***and*** create new opportunities for local contractors.

We're fighting blight in other ways too. Between August and September, HED, Public Works, and the Parks Department worked extra hours in the morning and evenings to carry out *more than 1,200 additional inspections* as part of a plan targeting vacant properties.

Our residents are a tremendous partner in this effort. **You** reported 1,400 complaints directly either by phone or via GovAlert, an app that you can download to your phone. Thanks to your input, 1,100 of those complaints were abated, and 1,000 court summonses were issued for violations.

Our roads are also due to receive a *major makeover*. By the end of this month, PSE&G will repave more than 30 roads all over the city that were torn up for line maintenance. Next on the horizon is our \$2 million plan under Director Wale Onitiri to pave *57 additional City streets starting this spring*.

Public Health

Tonight I also want to discuss public health. We cannot advance unless we do our best to keep residents and businesses safe from COVID-19. Nothing hurts progress more than businesses closed, students stuck at home, and fewer and fewer visitors to our city.

Yet, I'm proud to report that as of today, *more than 73% of our residents have received the COVID-19 vaccine*.

When the state recognized a racial divide among early vaccination rates, they chose Trenton as a pioneer site for their Faith-Based Vaccine Program. With very little notice, we were

entrusted to ensure thousands of bonus vaccines made it into predominately Black and Latino communities.

And we did exactly just that: our COVID team, with the support of dozens of church groups, FEMA volunteers and U.S. Army medical professionals administered over 8,000 vaccines. A very special thank you to Pastor Rodriguez at the Pentecostal Church on North Clinton Avenue for his tremendous assistance in that effort.

The impact was dramatic: vaccination rates among Trenton communities of color skyrocketed from as low as 6% percent to **40%** of new vaccinations.

I have to commend the relentless efforts of Dr. Lopez and Health Officer Yvette Graffie-Cooper, who have had considerable support from OEM Director Grady Griffin and Director of Recreation Maria Richardson. *They are the best team in the state.*

In fact, we just challenged Paterson to a competition to see which City will have the highest vaccination rate by the end of the year. We're going to win by continuing to provide vaccines where our residents can most easily access them: at churches, schools, parks and even in the homes of seniors and those with disabilities who are unable to travel.

Now, we're starting our booster program to ensure we build on that success well into the future. This delta variant is aggressive. It's dangerous, especially to unvaccinated residents. ***That's why we're going to allocate \$2 million in rescue funds*** to develop and staff a permanent vaccine booster program.

Keep in mind that individuals between the ages of 18 and 29 are one of the least vaccinated groups in Trenton. *I ask everyone listening to me tonight to join us in our campaign to reach our youth in the coming weeks.* If you haven't yet been vaccinated and are unsure, *call*

us – Director Lopez and her team will be happy to answer any questions you might have, discuss the science, and help you best protect yourself and your loved ones.

COVID has made things tough on us in other ways too: homelessness and food insecurity are constant threats to our most vulnerable residents.

That’s why we helped **200** families, including **418** children, with rent expenses. Its why we helped over **800** homeless families, fire victims, and seniors secure housing or avoid eviction.

We’ve also provided meals - up to **800** a day - to seniors and COVID-impacted households, thanks in large part to the help of Trenton Area Soup Kitchen, Meals on Wheels and others. Our Summer Food Service Program also provided over **60,000** meals during the summer months.

But even if we can solve the immediate needs of food and shelter, the mental toll of COVID-19, gun violence and other trauma is a constant concern. **That’s why we’re creating that new mental health program funded by the American Rescue Plan that we will put before Council in the coming weeks.**

Meanwhile, the TPD is doing its part to help with a recent uptick in overdose cases. They’re taking advantage of a recent **Opioid Response Team Grant** to coordinate with healthcare professionals and treatment centers to aid arrestees who are struggling with addiction.

Trenton Water Works

Speaking of health, I want to discuss how far Trenton Water Works has come under Director Mark Lavenberg. As stewards of this precious resource, we need to show our residents and ratepayers that Trenton is willing to do whatever it can to improve water quality.

To date, more than **5,000 lead service lines** have been replaced with a safer copper alternative.

Meanwhile, all 24 filters at the water filtration plant have been replaced. Next up is a \$5.5-million project to renovate the plant's water intake.

We're also bringing \$4 million in Rescue funds to *finally* replace the water main in Ewing's Olden Ave business district that is notorious for flooding and other issues.

Lastly, while we're making investments in water infrastructure, *I'm even prouder of the investments we are making in the Trenton residents who run the utility.* We're now a few semesters into our new Training and Apprenticeship Program, which for the first time in the utility's history provides current employees with the education necessary to pursue higher-level jobs in water treatment and distribution.

This two-year program is open to employees of all ranks and educational backgrounds. *Since its inception in September 2020, the program has graduated 14 students and welcomed 14 new students for the 2022 class.*

Parks, Recreation and Culture

Tonight, I'd also like to touch upon all the improvements coming to Trenton's parks and community centers this year.

Trenton is a city defined by great moments in history. *It's out of respect for that legacy that we're making sure the Trenton Free Public Library gets the repairs it needs.*

This includes \$4 million in ARP funds for repairs and improvements to the main building on Academy Street. Without these renovations, the library – the second oldest in the nation - will suffer further damage to its many resources, including *irreplaceable historic artifacts.*

We're also making headway on establishing a historical trail showcasing the African American experience in Trenton. We're preserving the Carver Center – a notable community meeting site that's been around since the early 1900s; the Higbee School, which was the first African American School in Trenton; and the Locust Hill Cemetery, which holds ten African American soldiers who died in the Civil War. We want the trail to also showcase Catherine “Stoney” Graham's historic march downtown, which mirrored Dr. Martin Luther King's march on Washington.

Speaking of ARP funding, when we unveiled our first plan in June and asked for public input, we received *overwhelming* support for youth programming.

Well, we hear you loud and clear – we're going to advance a ***nearly \$2 million proposal under Director Richardson for sweeping improvements at recreational fields across Trenton.*** This includes North Trenton Athletic Fields, West End Athletic Fields, Hetzel Field, Wetzell

Field, Chambersburg Field, 611 Field, and Cadwalader Park. The funds will be used for repairs and improvements, including new batting cages, food stands and bleachers.

Already in the works is a recently approved plan to renovate basketball courts across the city. We've also made safety improvements in playgrounds city-wide, including Martin Luther King Park, where we installed new playground equipment last year.

Also, thanks to community and Council support, we're able fund architectural designs for the Taylor Avenue and Amtico Square sections of the Assunpink Greenway Park Project. This progressive plan seeks to transform those vacant industrial sites into brand new recreational space for Trenton's children.

In a city that craves youth activities, this plan delivers. It incorporates a ton of ideas we've received from years of extensive community outreach, including an outdoor skatepark, street hockey rink, and soccer court.

Lastly, this is a city built on block parties – cookouts – and great music. One of the worst parts of COVID is we haven't been able to see you as much as we want. Thankfully, with folks getting vaccinated, we got to see more than 10,000 residents and visitors at special events hosted by our Parks department this year.

We were grateful for your company at our 15 'Take It To The Streets' neighborhood block parties, 12 movie events citywide, and 10 concerts including the House Music Festival and the NJ Capital Philharmonic Orchestra.

This year, Director Richardson and Director Steve Wilson decided to have one central National Night Out celebration in Cadwalader Park. It got great reviews from the families who attended, and we'll try to make it even bigger next year.

We had another great year of Trenton Public Pools, which kicked off with a visit by our Governor and Trenton's late and great Sarah Dash. We had *an average of 850 residents* at our five pools *each day*, including Hetzel, which is sporting a new parking lot and rain garden.

Speaking of Hetzel, Director Richardson accepted the “**Excellence in Design**” award in May from the NJ Parks and Recreation Association for the new layout of the pool and spray-ground complex.

Fiscal Management

Behind all of these improvements is an Administration Department under Business Administrator Adam Cruz, who worked all year with the N.J. Department of Community Affairs to secure \$10 million in capital city aid and \$10 million in transitional aid, including a bonus \$5 million allocated specifically to update our aging police fleet and parks in all four wards.

This is a huge improvement over the \$6 million in transitional aid we received in my first year. We thank our state representatives from the Fightin' 15th – Senator Shirley Turner, Assemblywoman Verlina Reynolds Jackson, and Assemblyman Anthony Verrelli – for helping us secure this critical funding.

The budget team also included Finance Director Ron Zilinski, Assistant BA Colin Cherry, Chief of Staff Arch Liston, and Budget Examiner Alphonso Jones. Thanks to them, even if your County and School Tax portions of your tax bill increase, ***our portion, the municipal tax, will not.***

I also need to thank our Lieutenant Governor Sheila Oliver and Local Government Services Chief, Jacqueline Suarez, as well as DCA monitor Jack Lipsett. They didn't just help us with transitional aid, they also helped us achieve one of the most challenging undertakings for any municipality: *transitioning from a fiscal to a calendar year budget*. This will make future budgets and tax bills far easier to plan.

The best part is that during the 18-month transition period, **we only had to make one pension payment to the state but still received two separate allotments of state aid**. For a city that's grappling with shortfalls related to COVID-19, there was no better time than now for that change.

Altogether, we're increasing our investment in city parks; we're making critical upgrades to public safety; we're making essential improvements at Public Works, Trenton Water Works, and other facilities. *And we can do **all of this** without demanding a rate increase from our residents.*

In fact – that additional state aid, that move to the calendar year budget, and our strategic use of the American Rescue Plan will enable us to present ***not just one, not two, but three budgets in a row that call for a zero percent local tax increase.***

In closing, I want to thank our Directors who I haven't mentioned yet, but still provide tremendous services for our residents. Wes Bridges from our Law Department who is diligently working to resolve casework for the City; our newest Director, Kenneth Douglas, who I joined just last night at 2:00 a.m. to oversee efforts to contain a major fire on South Broad St.; our chief inspector, Yolanda Vazquez, who is there every day in the neighborhoods, making sure our houses are clean and safe; our Personnel Director, Steve Ponella, who has streamlined our hiring

and retention processes; our Sewer Director, Joseph McIntyre, who was especially instrumental during our super storms this year; Taya Brown-Humphrey, the Superintendent of our Water Treatment Facility, and last but not least, our Court Administrator, Tonya Stewart, who helped our Courts go virtual during the pandemic and has improved our case backlog from one of the worst in the county to one of the best in the state!

I also want to thank our rank-and-file employees. We spent a lot of time talking about our leadership, but it's the civil servants out in the field who keep our city running. I'm happy we were able to fulfill our promise to take care of city workers. Our negotiations with AFSCME – the union that supports much of our municipal workforce – have been successful, and a new contract has been approved by DCA. ***These are some of the most substantial salary increases in 10 years.*** This is a tremendous investment in Trenton's middle class - **95% of those employees live right here in the city.** I look forward to Council approving the contract next week.

I also want to thank City Council and everyone who came to join us tonight, both in person and from home.

I know that sometimes, progress isn't easy. Sometimes, we have to fight tooth and nail for every inch of improvement. Every derelict house taken down. Every pothole filled. Every deadly weapon seized. Every youth that can finally spend a fun and safe day in a park or a pool.

But that's a fight worth having – and one we intend to ***win.***

And, as our residents showed us this year – **failure is not an option.** Trentonians rallied this year, and the progress we achieved would not be possible without you:

- That includes the dozens of church groups who came together to help get their congregations vaccinated.

- The residents who supplied more than a hundred ideas to improve our A-R-P plan.
- Groups like East Trenton Collaborative and the Latino Merchants Association who helped us target the worst abandoned homes and underutilized business sites.
- The schools, employers and non-profits that have joined us in our quest to bring career development opportunities to Trenton Water Works and formerly incarcerated individuals.
- The growing number of residents that refuse to turn a blind eye to crime and supply critical tips to the TPD so they can get more drugs and guns off our streets.
- And lastly, the legion of concerned community stakeholders that gave moving public testimony on Amtico Square, our cannabis ordinance and other initiatives before Council – there is no doubt your efforts pushed those projects over the finish line. Your voice was truly heard.

God bless America, and God bless the City of Trenton. Let's continue to lift this city together.