

*State of the City Address 2020
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 at Trenton Central High School's auditorium. I want to thank Assistant Superintendent Hope Grant for lending us this venue.

Trenton is a city worth fighting for. From the Battle Monument to Cadwalader Park, there are many distinctive neighborhoods with multigenerational and diverse residents who call Trenton home. We've always had ups and downs, but the Capital City, while facing many challenges, will make it through these unprecedented times.

Take this magnificent room that replaced one from the 1930s. Although not as opulent without the chandeliers of the past, it truly has become an environment suitable for 21st century learning. This is a room that should be filled with young voices, enjoying a production from their classmates or celebrating one of their many academic achievements. Instead, these halls have remained largely empty due to the pandemic.

But one day, our students will return from their all-virtual lesson plans and resume taking advantage of this amazing educational facility. In fact, I don't doubt that one day our STEM students will make invaluable contributions to medical science, contributions that may even help stop future pandemics.

That's what makes Trenton so special- our grit and determination, fueled by the strength of our neighborhoods and community groups, our churches, our schools, and our people.

It is because of our resilience, I am here to say that the State of the City is strong, the State of the City is unbroken, and our best years are still ahead of us.

I want to start by discussing our efforts to keep COVID-19 from erasing two years of progress. No doubt, this virus has strained communities across the country. But for cities like Trenton, cities that are just starting to see some form of economic progress, this pandemic is all the more serious.

We met the pandemic head-on in March by launching Mercer County's first COVID-19 testing site for our first responders who are on the front lines of

the crisis. We were also one of the first cities to examine our local nursing home practices – a job normally done by the state – to prevent further transmission among the most vulnerable members of our community. We even launched a shelter for displaced and homeless individuals who tested positive for the virus.

We also worked with the Trenton Health Team, the Henry J. Austin Center, area hospitals and the County to secure a mobile health van to operate rotating testing sites in all four wards. We were grateful for the Churches that volunteered to host testing sites, including Trinity Church, Galilee Baptist Church, Living Hope Alliance and God of the Prophecy Church. We secured generous donations of Personal Protective Equipment from countless community and church groups and made sure they found their way to city employees, first responders, nursing homes, civic groups and of course, our residents.

As of today, we've had more than 4,000 cases and lost more than 80 Trentonians to COVID-19. We grieve for the ones we've lost and must stay vigilant to stop the spread of COVID-19 in our community. These losses

have hit us all close to home, including the passing of Luis Mollinedo, the City's former Public Works Director.

A second wave advances on the city at this very moment, and we are acting just as decisively as we did in March. This virus weighs on all of us heavily from the loss of life, the loss of income, and the loss of businesses that are based in our City.

We are implementing spot-testing in neighborhoods with a growing number of cases and working with the City's small businesses to ensure social distancing and sanitary conditions continue to be enforced. We are also in the process of redistributing masks to residents and hope they continue to take this virus seriously.

But we'll have more funding at our disposal, including another \$3 million from the Coronavirus Relief Fund that the State is awarding to Trenton. I'd also like to thank Congresswoman Bonnie Watson Coleman, along with HUD Regional Director Lynn Patton, who helped clear over \$6 million in federal CARES Act dollars for Trenton. These funds will help us address

lingering issues with food insecurity, affordable housing, and access to critical health services.

In fact, this HUD funding allowed us to launch a new COVID-19 Emergency Rental Assistance Program, which will provide one-time payments of up to \$3,000 for low-income families to help pay for rent and utilities.

I couldn't have asked for a better COVID-19 response team. Our former Fire Director, Derrick Sawyer, and our Director of Emergency Medical Services Grady Griffin, spearheaded the operations. Health Officer Yvette Graffie-Cooper provided daily updates on testing statistics, contact tracing, and safety enforcement. Our Recreation Director Maria Richardson, along with our Housing Director Ben Delisle and Public Works Director Wale Onitiri, secured the emergency shelter for homeless persons who were displaced due to COVID-19. I'm also grateful for our Business Administrator Adam Cruz, Chief of Staff Yoshi Manale, and our Law Director John Morelli for their countless contributions throughout this pandemic.

Despite these challenges, many of our economic projects have continued on to fruition. In fact, 104 new businesses have opened in Trenton since 2019. That's progress worth fighting for.

It's why we created an Emergency Loan Fund for businesses affected by COVID-19. It provides two percent interest loans of up to \$20,000. These loans have generous repayment terms and help cover payroll, rent, mortgage and utility costs.

To date, 34 emergency loans totaling more than half a million dollars have successfully closed.

It was encouraging to hear from business owners, like Miosotis Belmarez of JMC Solutions, that this program helped her survive financially for three months. Or Maurice Hallett of 1911 Smoke House Barbecue, who told us that these funds, along with the tremendous support of city residents, kept his employees working.

And this partnership with our business community will continue throughout this crisis and beyond. We just partnered with NJ Community Capital to

create a New Job Creation Loan Program to help existing and prospective Trenton businesses hire more employees. The program offers up to \$250,000, with favorable terms based on the number of Trentonians hired through the program.

We're doing everything we can to foster an environment favorable to attracting new businesses and jobs. I am pleased to announce that the City's Economic Development Department has attracted one of the area's prominent engineering firms, Princeton Hydro, which will open its doors in our Roebling Block III.

We have also sought to have legal cannabis production facilities consider locating their operations here in Trenton. Now that the people of New Jersey have approved the legalization of adult-use marijuana, the Capital City is working hard to attract cannabis growers as a way to create jobs and economic opportunities for our residents. With plenty of available industrial space at our disposal to accommodate both medical and recreational production, it's no surprise we have seven entities competing to establish their operations in Trenton. And we must ensure that Trenton residents are a part of these new enterprises.

While my administration supports our growing business community, we're also transforming this city block by block – restoring our aging infrastructure, improving our parks and community centers, and making way for new, safe, and affordable housing.

It starts with the basics - paving roads, filling potholes, cleaning properties- for years, these needs were ignored. Now, I guarantee you've seen our crews, led by our Public Works Director Wale Onitiri, out there every week, reclaiming streets and properties from blight and neglect.

In fact, over the last two years, Public Works tended to over 900 overgrown properties, cleared a thousand alleyways, and paved 15 miles of streets throughout the city. We have worked on Hart Avenue, Taylor, West State Street, Parkside, Morningside, Centre Street and countless others. In the meantime, the City has also purchased a pothole filling machine that will help us with temporary fixes until the spring repaving program begins again.

We've also identified and are in the process of demolishing 250 derelict properties, and I want to thank Councilmen Joe Harrison and George Muschal for helping us identify those properties.

Now, keeping our city clean is one thing - finding what to do with all our abandoned homes is another. When I ran for office, I promised 1,000 homes in 1,000 days - Well, I'm happy to report that 712 previously vacant housing units are now occupied. And we're well on our way to meet our goal as hundreds of new housing units are completed within the next year. Another 80 newly constructed homes have been completed.

These projects were made possible by my administration fighting to unfreeze millions in federal funding that the city could not access in the past because of concerns that Trenton couldn't properly manage the funds.

Well, we finally put in place the appropriate staff and expertise, and we've restored that trust. Those funds are now unlocked and hard at work all across our city.

This includes the funding to jumpstart Patriot Village II, which will turn a once-vacant lot into 72 affordable homes on Brunswick Avenue in North Trenton when completed next October.

Last April, the Van Sciver redevelopment project on South Broad Street was greenlit by the city. This project will transform three vacant buildings into brand new apartments with ground floor retail spaces. Of the 120 homes, most will be market rate, with 48 units available as affordable housing.

And just last month, Trenton Housing Authority held a ribbon-cutting ceremony to celebrate the completion of Turner Pointe, which transformed the long-vacant Page Homes on Calhoun Street into safe, affordable, and energy-efficient rental units for 77 Trenton families.

With just these three projects, we're bringing 269 additional new homes to Trenton.

And you are going to see more of these projects over the next few years. City Council recently approved our five-year consolidated plan that outlines all of our upcoming development plans backed by federal funding.

As part of that plan, we're setting aside more funding for low income households than ever before, to help folks with emergency plumbing, electrical, roofing and heating repairs.

I'm proud that we've also been able to purchase the historic Carver Center on Fowler Street so we can honor its legacy by restoring it as a recreation center. Renovation plans are also underway to fix roofs, electrical and plumbing at senior and community centers in all four wards.

Right now, we are also restoring the historic Jackson Bridge, which will allow that centerpiece of Mill Hill Park to be enjoyed for many generations to come. We just rebuilt the playground and picnic grove at Martin Luther King Park. The Hetzel Pool complex is becoming a world class aquatic center thanks to the improvements we've made in just the last two years.

With these projects and dozens of others in the works, we create more recreational opportunities for our kids, something that is very important to me.

And while our Council members and I disagree from time to time, I know it's important to them as well.

That's why I'm grateful to City Council, in particular Councilman Santiago Rodriguez, who approved a much-needed Child Learning Center on North Broad Street across the street from Mercer County Community College.

They also just approved a new state of the art housing complex that will transform the space next to Reverend Taylor's church on Perry Street.

Imagine children leaving the learning center and opening their eyes to plan for their college future – all on one block.

Today, I was excited to attend the grand opening of Kinder Smiles, an affordable dental practice that has partnered with Mercer County College to help teach new dental techs while keeping kids healthy.

While we improve the quality of life for city residents, we're also improving conditions for Trenton's animal population. Thanks to our wonderful partners at Trenton Animals Rock, who began managing our shelter's foster program last year, we now have a no-kill shelter for the first time in history. We're going to build on that progress by getting a new animal shelter that can better meet the growing needs of the Capital City. Joining us in that effort will be Councilwoman Caldwell-Wilson, who has been a tireless animal welfare advocate for years.

But at the end of the day, we can't do this alone. The real agents of change are going to be Trentonians themselves. I have been honored by the many dedicated residents who work tirelessly without compensation. Folks like Octavia Sutphin with the Neighborhood Improvement Association; Jessie Tossie who works on behalf of seniors; Miko Greene and Trish Lee who bring life to the East Trenton Community; and Latarsha Burke of the African American Cultural Collaborative.

We're excited to put forward a proposal to create a land bank to streamline our efforts to address abandoned properties in the city. This plan has met

with success under Mayor Ras Baraka in Newark, and I want to thank him for helping us get our program started.

A land bank can cut through the red tape - liens, taxes, and other obstacles - to place properties into the hands of city residents, even those who want to be homeowners for the first time. We're working with City Council and multiple community groups at this moment to put together a list of properties for the bank.

I'm announcing tonight that we are having another home auction on December 9th. For the first time, we will administer this auction online through the city's website so that you can browse and bid conveniently from your computer or cell phone.

With a five-year residency requirement, this auction is strictly for people who want to call Trenton home, helping keep these houses affordable for prospective residents.

And, with the City Council's full support, we just launched our very own "Adopt-a-Lot" program here in Trenton – residents can now clean, maintain,

and otherwise care for city-owned properties, using them as they see fit to improve their neighborhoods while we plan future development.

Community gardens, outside reading spaces, social gathering spots - These Adopt-a-Lot efforts will strengthen community bonds, beautify neighborhoods, and even deter illegal activity. We know Councilman Rodriguez will be happy to use this program to expand his vegetable garden.

I've seen what groups like Isles and the East Trenton Collaborative have done in restoring Trenton neighborhoods. I've seen what even one person can do, like Councilman Joe Harrison, who is a one-man army in cleaning up Trenton neighborhoods. Or Lloyd Thomas, a citizen we honored earlier this year for his work tending to Riverside, cutting vines and bushes, and picking up garbage to beautify his neighborhood. Or Kelly Ingram from I AM TRENTON, who has helped fund many of our worthy community improvement projects. Or Wills Kins who helps take visitors on bike tours of historic Trenton and helped build our indoor skateboard park.

I'm proud to report that Trenton home values have been going up steadily over the last two years. That's what happens when you work with the community to improve neighborhoods house by house, lot by lot, park by park, and we're not going to stop anytime soon.

A city that's on the rise deserves a water utility it can be proud of. When I first took office, I pledged to modernize our 200-year-old Trenton Water Works to ensure that it continues to produce the finest drinking water in the United States. We've expanded its workforce by hiring local residents. We've launched a comprehensive, six-year, \$400 million-dollar capital plan. We've removed and continue to replace thousands of lead service lines from our system. We've improved customer service. We've added additional training for our personnel, and we continue to make the substantial progress you demand.

I want to end tonight by discussing public safety. Last year, the city had 16 homicides and was trending for an overall 12% drop in crime under Police Director Sheilah Coley.

I wish I could tell you we have continued to make progress on this front. Unfortunately, like many other cities across the country, these numbers have spiked with the onset of COVID-19.

Guns are still too easy to get - especially given our proximity to states with lax gun laws - and all too often find themselves in the hands of those with no regard for human life.

I'm just as angry as you are about the gun violence. I've sat with the families. I've visited the hospitals. I mourn every Trentonian whose life was stolen by this violence. But we need to do more than just offer our hopes and prayers.

Our Police Department, despite being understaffed from years of budget cuts, still arrested over 200 individuals and took more than 160 guns and 3,000 rounds of ammunition off our streets during the last year, all thanks to the brave men and women who put their lives on the line everyday they leave their house.

At this moment, officers of the TPD along with the Mercer Sheriff's Department, led by Jack Kemler, the Mercer County Prosecutor's Office, led by Angelo Onofri, and our State Police are working together day and night – whether it's through more patrols, increased surveillance, or better coordination – to stop the individuals who threaten our communities with violence. I want to thank them all for their tireless assistance to the Capital City.

Meanwhile, we are working to increase the size of the Trenton Police Department so it can meet the growing needs of our community. We have a police academy in the works at this moment and will hopefully start another one sometime before spring.

Our police department also successfully applied for over a million dollars in federal grant funds, which will help hire ten new officers for community policing and violent crime prevention. I want to thank Congresswoman Bonnie Watson Coleman, Senators Cory Booker and Bob Menendez, Senator Shirley Turner, Assemblywoman Verlina Reynolds-Jackson, and Assemblyman Anthony S. Verrelli for bringing these much-needed resources to Trenton.

Our police force must reflect the community it serves. I ask you to look to your friends and family and ask them to join our department. There is no better time to serve your community than right now.

Meanwhile, we're working to bring all the latest technology to the police force, an effort for which we've received considerable support from Councilman Muschal.

Our multi-million-dollar real-time crime center, paid for with the support of Lieutenant Governor Sheila Oliver and Attorney General Gurbir Grewal, will significantly boost gunfire detection, video surveillance, and sharing intelligence when it goes live later this year. As part of the setup, dozens of additional cameras are being installed at hotspots all over the city.

The police department is also working with our local business community as part of the Trenton Crime Eye, which allows business owners to register their cameras with our police department. That way, those businesses can be contacted for critical intel if a crime happens in their area. We encourage all business owners to register right now.

As Director Coley has stated, community policing starts with the community. We need to treat an assault on one of our residents as an assault on us all, so that any person that recklessly endangers our community will find no shelter or support within our borders.

That's why we're excited to announce that TPD is looking for volunteers as part of its Block Watch program. Neighborhoods can now work hand-in-hand with designated police officers to report crimes, suspicious activity and city code violations on their streets.

The Block Watch program will show that it's not our cameras or patrols criminals should worry about, but the watchful eye of every Trentonian that wants a safer neighborhood for their families and children.

We must also support those whose lives have been shattered by senseless violence. This past summer, we started work on our Trenton Resilience program with Council President Kathy McBride to connect gun violence victims and their families with essential trauma and mental healthcare providers.

We recognize that trust is a two-way street. Our country is grappling with a long-overdue discussion on police accountability and oversight.

Thankfully, Director Coley is changing the way TPD does business. She's made great strides in ramping up de-escalation protocols, assigning more officers to community relations, and implementing more body-worn cameras than ever before.

She's working to make community policing more than just buzzwords, but actual standard operating procedure – running more youth and community engagement programs, promoting officers of color, and most importantly, ensuring complaints about police misconduct are treated with the attention and severity that our residents demand. Look out for improvements to the TPD website, where we will make it easier for our residents to provide feedback and anonymous tips.

A great example of our efforts is the TPD-sponsored Trenton RISE program. This community-based youth center provides a safe and enriching afterschool environment for youth between 12 and 18.

These kids will have access to computer programming classes, skill development programs, and career and college advisement. They'll also have access to activities to relax and socialize safely, including fitness classes, book clubs, and more.

These young people will learn valuable, transferable skills that will serve them well in their future endeavors. Endeavors that are a welcome alternative to a life of crime that claims too many promising teenagers in this city.

We hope that the community can finally take full advantage of this resource soon. A few weeks ago, City Council approved our major renovation plans to add an upgraded computer lab, laundry facilities, and other new services.

To help break the cycle of crime that claims far too many of our families, we are working to provide a different path for those returning from incarceration. We started with a change in Trenton's employment policy to

assess job applicants on a case-by-case basis, rather than automatically disqualifying them for having a criminal record in the last seven years.

Just a few weeks ago, we stood in front of City Hall to celebrate the launch of our Office of Returning Citizens, which is already helping those who were once incarcerated find employment, professional training, and housing.

So far, eight formerly incarcerated individuals have already found employment through the program, with more than 60 additional applicants currently being considered. And we just had our first job fair that featured multiple “second chance” employers from in and around Trenton.

It’s been inspiring to hear success stories from folks like Dontae Thomas, who turned his life around and now runs a city fitness program. Or Mack “Baller” Murray, who applied for municipal employment during three previous administrations, but because of his criminal record, could not get a job with the City. He finally got a job with our Public Works Department in August.

I want to thank Tracy Syphax, Perry Shaw, Reverend John Taylor, Stacy Heading and the rest of our Reentry Committee for their amazing assistance.

This has been one of the most challenging years in Trenton's history. But my administration and the dedicated residents in our neighborhoods and church groups throughout our great city have met that challenge. 2020 for the City of Trenton is a story about resilience - it's a story about how we will endure and overcome COVID-19. It's a story about how we nourish our growing business community and transform abandoned properties into new homes for Trenton residents. It's about making a water utility that is becoming an example for others to follow. It's about inspiring cooperation between the police and the community they serve.

We talk about Trenton in exceptional terms because the city is exceptional. Its people, who make up some of the most diverse communities in the country, have come together for a common purpose.

- The business owners who are still up and running due to COVID-19 relief.

- The teenager who got the help and support needed to stay clear from a path of crime.
- The Trenton child who finds a companion by adopting a stray dog from our newly proclaimed no-kill shelter.
- The family that has access to safe and modern housing for the first time in their lives.
- The returning citizens who never thought they would get a second chance with the same city in which they committed a crime, rewriting their history with a career in public service.

Your resilience inspires me every day that I'm on the job.

As we embark on a new chapter of America with our President-elect, let us all be thankful for the loved ones in our life, and collectively work to ensure that our Capital City's best days are ahead of us.

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