

Open

Friends, family, neighbors, and colleagues—good afternoon, welcome to Providence City Hall, and thank you for being here today!

I want to acknowledge my colleagues in government who have been great partners over the past four years. To the Governor and to members of the Providence delegation, thank you for your support and for always advocating for our city.

To the outgoing Council President David Salvatore, I deeply appreciate your passion for the city and I thank you for your leadership. To the incoming Council President Sabina Matos—I look forward to working with you and the entire council to make our city continue to shine bright.

I want to thank my staff and departments directors. The people behind the curtain. The folks who make sure that Providence is a city that works for everyone. I want to thank you for your dedication and hard work, oftentimes performed under difficult and stressful circumstances.

I want to thank the people of Providence. The residents who have put their faith in me, yet again, to be your leader. To serve you, to invest in you, to believe in you. It is an honor.

Lastly, I want to recognize my family. I want to thank my partner in life, Stephanie, my future wife, and mother of Omar Ernesto. I want to thank you and Omar for being there for me every day. Stephanie, you inspire me with your passion and strength and I know Omar will admire you as much I do.

I want to thank my sister, my brother-in-law, my niece, nephew, and my entire family. Thank you for being by my side throughout both campaigns and everything in between.

And most important of all, my mother and my father, Aurora and Jorge. No estuviera aquí sin ustedes. Les agradezco todos sus sacrificios. Los admiro por su valentía, su inspiración, y los quiero más que nada, por el amor que me han dado.

Four Years Ago

Staying true to our values and working together, we have accomplished so much over the past four years.

Four years ago, the talk of bankruptcy was still in the air and there was a real fear of the city going under. Now, we've stabilized our finances and are shifting the conversation to our long-term health. We've paid off the deficit, improved our credit rating, created a "rainy day" fund and are now in the strongest financial position we've had in decades. It's safe to say that four years ago, no one thought this was possible. But together, we did it!

Four years ago, there was little development happening in the city. Today, we have cranes in the sky and over half a billion dollars being invested, our hotel rooms are full, and property

values are rising. People are investing here, they're visiting here, and they're buying homes here. People believe in the direction we're heading in and they want to be a part of it.

Four years ago, homicides were creeping upward. Today, homicides are at historic lows, shootings are down significantly, burglaries are down even more, and there are more opportunities for young people to keep their lives on track and stay out of trouble.

Four years ago, there were over 600 abandoned homes throughout the city and dozens of public parks hadn't been improved since the 1970s. Today, almost 500 formerly-abandoned homes are now occupied. We've rehabbed over 80 neighborhood parks, brought back the beauty of Roger Williams Park, and we've made our public spaces more vibrant than they've been in decades.

Four years ago, complaints to City Hall still went unanswered and customer service was lacking. Today, we've integrated technology and created a 311 system. Now, all complaints get addressed, potholes get filled, and snow gets plowed curb to curb. Building off of the work of my predecessors, city government operates more efficiently than it ever has and we've eliminated the "know a guy" culture in City Hall.

Four years ago, summer learning loss was rampant and little programming existed to address it. Today, thousands of kids have access to free summer learning programs, thousands of families take advantage of \$5/week summer camps, and thousands of young people have paid summer jobs and internships in the city.

Four years ago, our infrastructure continued to crumble and there was no long term plan to address it. Today, we have a 5-year strategic plan, we're investing \$48M this year on improvements, and we're investing \$400M over the next ten years to rebuild our schools.

Four years ago, PVD Fest did not exist. Now, we're on to our fifth year of turning downtown into a stage and our buildings into a canvas. We have invested in arts programs in our schools, expanded public art, and supported our creative community. We've made downtown fun again and we're living up to our brand as the Creative Capital.

Four years ago, we decided to lead by example on sustainability and climate change. We're the proud home of the first producer of offshore wind farms in the United States, we've invested in solar energy, and we've retrofitted our buildings to be more energy efficient. We are only 180,000 people, but we serve as a model for the rest of the country on how to reduce and eliminate our carbon footprint.

This has all been possible because we have worked together, led with our values, and stayed true to who we are. As many of you know, my parents emigrated here from Guatemala. They left everything behind and made a courageous, incredible sacrifice so that my sister and I could have a better life. It's an amazing story that in a different time would have been celebrated as an example of what makes America so special.

My parent's journey was indeed amazing, but it wasn't unique. For generations, families in Providence, through grit and sheer will, have found a way to eke out a better life. My family story is the same as your story, as your parents' story and your grandparents' story. Stripped down of the details, we're all striving for a better future. We're far more alike than we are different.

So as we reflect on what we've done, where we are, and where we're going, may we remember that our story is one of universal values, shared by all of us here today. It's a story of dreams and optimism, of community and camaraderie, and of vision and courage. Let's build off of the foundation of the past four years, drawing on those values that unite us, and invest in bold ways that make us an even more resilient city.

Investing in Community

Throughout my childhood, my parents taught me that it's not just about making it through the door, but in making sure others make it through as well. What good does prosperity do us if it is not broadly shared? Just as my parents helped welcome my tios and tias, and helped them settle in the United States, so too has Providence welcomed foreigners and helped them start their lives in our city. As a city of immigrants, we have a tradition embedded deeply within us of giving a helping hand to those who need it the most.

Today, we continue to extend our hand to immigrants from foreign lands, but we also must extend our hand to those who are being left behind here in our own city. The truth is that our city ranks among the worst in the country when it comes to income inequality; there is a stark divide of "haves" and "have nots."

As the author Richard Reeves writes, the folks who "have" spend a lot of time and money making sure that their children "have" as well. We send our children to the best day cares, we enroll them in the best schools, we send them to summer enrichment camps, we secure for them the best internships, and we do all that we can so that they have a leg up. As a new parent, I fully understand how and why parents would do such things. But as your mayor, my single-minded drive is to ensure that these opportunities are accessible to all of our children regardless of which zip code they are born in.

That's why we will continue our cradle-to-career supports in summer learning, summer camps and summer jobs so that the dream of making something of yourself and making your family proud is available to all of us and not just to the privileged few.

And in the coming years, we want to make a dramatic investment in early childhood learning because too many of our kids are falling behind, even before they get started. Over the next four years we will work together to make Providence one of the few cities in the country to offer free, universal pre-K to all of our kids. Let's invest in our people from the youngest age and make sure they have an equal opportunity to achieve their dreams.

Community Collaboration

My parents taught me that when you pay it forward, it always comes back to enrich your own life. My parents were part of a tight network of mutual support on Cranston Street. I remember my mother taking care of scores of neighborhood kids, driving half the neighborhood to school in her white Oldsmobile, and supporting recent immigrants that needed a hand up. In return, the people that my mother helped would pay her generosity back in countless ways. We looked out for one another and created a sense of a community. I've come to see that neighbors helping neighbors is not only a powerful principle at the personal level, but also at the institutional one. So the question is: how do we inculcate our largest institutions with this same neighborly spirit?

Well, over the past 18 months, I've been engaged in conversations with all of our universities and hospitals. Through this work, we formed the Urban Innovation Partnership where the city and all of our anchor institutions have been rethinking our relationship to form deeper partnerships with each other.

Throughout the United States, in cities such as Boston, Pittsburgh and San Francisco, it is these institutions, magnets of talent and gatekeepers of opportunity, that are responsible for those cities' thriving economies. Here in Providence, we have an Ivy League University, the best design school in the world, the best culinary school in the country, and five other schools that are hungry and growing each year.

These institutions can do more and they want to do more. We have set a vision together, based on locally-driven innovation and inclusive economic growth so that we can both support our entrepreneurs and expand the reach to communities of color and disenfranchised groups. Over the next four years, we will work with all of our institutional partners in the spirit of mutual support to make sure that every one of our neighbors succeeds.

And this is critical because, as our city grows, we must remember that the success of the city is determined by the success of the people within it. We must be very careful to avoid the pitfalls of the cities I just mentioned and many others, in which they have "succeeded" so much that their own residents can no longer afford to live there.

This, of course, is not the kind of "success" that we want for Providence. We must take a critical look at the issues of gentrification, housing affordability and displacement from every angle and craft a comprehensive city response. Providence is on the verge of a very special moment in its history, but I only want to be part of that moment if our existing residents are part of it too. I ask every resident to be part of this work and participate in our "Housing and Affordability" summit that we will host this year. We need your voice and, as our city grows, let's make sure our existing city residents are the ones who benefit most.

Optimism and Vision

Another important lesson that I've learned from my parents, particularly from my father, is that being an immigrant requires that you have an unbreakable sense of optimism. Why else and how else could you throw caution to the wind and decide to emigrate?

My father came to this country without speaking a word of English and with little more than a phone number scribbled on a scrap piece of paper. Somehow--by skill, by luck, by divine intervention, who knows--my father found his way and managed to gain his footing. And, regardless of the countless obstacles and struggles, he has never lost the sense that the future, somehow and someday, will be even better than the present.

It is with that same optimism that generations of Providence residents have persevered and thrived. And it is also how, as a city, we dared to dream big and accomplished amazing feats.

We have moved rivers and moved highways, feats that many cities contemplate but very few actually accomplish. In that same spirit of boldness, we recently announced the Woonasquatucket River Vision plan: a 20-year vision that extends downtown due West and orients development towards the river and the community that surrounds it. Working with hundreds of community stakeholders, we crafted a vision that connects our city from Fox Point to the Waterplace basin to Valley Street to Manton Ave.

We have a beautiful, yet much forgotten, river that flows through the heart of our city. Let's continue the rediscovery of the Woonasquatucket, the expansion of our central core, the reconnection of divided communities, and the reintegration of neighborhoods left behind. Over the next four years, let's allow that boundless optimism to surface and let's reawaken our city-building mindset.

And, as we build our city, let's build in the people-focused infrastructure that will bring greater equity and connectivity to our neighborhoods. Over the past several years, we accomplished our goal of bringing digital devices to every child in every school at every moment. It is an important accomplishment for us, but we know that the digital divide still exists.

In a time when virtually every school assignment requires some connection to the internet, many of our kids do not have access to high speed internet in their home. These kids must visit a friend's house or somehow hustle to find internet in their neighborhoods just to complete their basic assignments. This certainly puts them at a disadvantage and it perpetuates the advantage of those who already have it. Over these next four years, I will work so that every school-age child in Providence has access to high-speed internet in their home. We want all of our kids to be ready to compete in the 21st century and, because of that, we will equip them with the tools that they need to get ahead.

We have come a long way in the past four years and while there's a lot to be proud of, we are not satisfied because there's so much more to do. As I think about the next four years, I will continue to focus on the momentum we have built and on the priorities I just outlined. In addition, I want to focus on another overarching issue that is becoming more urgent by the day.

As we look at the world today, in objective and concrete terms, there has never been a better and safer time to be alive. Life expectancy and living standards are up, death by violence and war is down, death by starvation has been virtually eliminated, infectious diseases have been reined in, and even some of the poorest parts of the planet have access to the most advanced technology in the world, a smart phone. Yet in spite of all this objective progress, there is still something missing. Depression is at record levels, suicides continue to rise, and overdoses have skyrocketed. People are feeling lonely, they're feeling anxious, and they're feeling angry.

There's no easy remedy for any of these maladies, but I believe the remedy begins with a change in mindset. I'm reminded of a story that a friend recently shared with me. There was an old gentleman who happened to be a university professor. He was a very caring and gentle person and he used to drive himself around even at his advanced age. When he drove on the highway, he was always careful to use the right hand lane. Over the years though, as his physical faculties diminished, he had to drive slower and slower. Sadly, this angered and even enraged many other drivers who had to share the road with him. They would honk their horn and blurt out obscenities towards the old man. He noticed that as the drivers passed him, that they would turn their necks in anger to see who this person was that was going so slow. He decided to make it easier for everyone so that they wouldn't have to strain their necks as they passed by. So, the old man put a bumper sticker on his car to let everyone know who he was. And the bumper sticker read: "I am just another version of you."

This story touches me because it reminds us that we are all connected to each other. And that person that we're so upset at, in a different context or in a different time, could be any of us. We are all connected, says the African concept of Ubuntu, and when we recognize our common humanity, we're more likely to live by the Golden Rule and treat others as we would want to be treated. It is because of this that, surrounded by faith leaders from all different religious traditions, we are launching Providence's "City of Kindness" initiative.

The initiative will begin by creating a kindness workgroup that will brainstorm ways that we can spread kindness throughout our city so that we lead our lives with more compassion and love for one another. In the next four years, I pledge to not only engage around budgets, infrastructure, development, education, and all those things that mayors talk about, but to also use this awesome platform that is being Providence's mayor, to engage in the meaningful work that it takes to be a kinder, more compassionate city. I ask you all to join us in this work.

These past four years have gone by so fast; it seems like just yesterday that I stood here as a new mayor. Four years later, I am very much the same man. Ready to serve my community with energy, optimism and boldness. Ready to lead my city with kindness and compassion.

We've had an amazing run over the past four years, but I truly believe that the best is yet to come. After four more years of progress, after four more years of leading with our values, and after four more years of believing in and supporting each other, I believe that Providence will

be known as the best mid-size city in the United States of America. With your support and working as One Providence, we will make that vision a reality. Thank you and God bless.