

A Focused Agenda for Providence

39th Mayor of Providence Brett P. Smiley 2023 Budget Speech

Welcome

Madam Council President, honorable members of the City Council, State Senators and Representatives, Department Directors, community partners and fellow residents of our great City of Providence –

I am pleased to be here with you this evening to present my proposed budget for the upcoming fiscal year.

When I took office, I promised our residents a City Hall focused on providing excellent city services, investments that will improve their quality of life, and a focused agenda that will ensure a stable economy for our future.

I also called on every member of our community—many of you in this room and tuning in tonight—to be a part of the process, to stay engaged and, as often as possible, to share the great stories that happen daily within our city.

I believe that the work we have ahead to make Providence the best-run city in America is guided by meaningful community engagement, and I have been delighted by the amount of people who have taken us up on that call.

Before our first week was over, we announced our Education Workshop that gathered Providence students, parents, educators, and community members to discuss how we can improve learning opportunities outside the classroom, invest in our school facilities and better prepare for Providence Public Schools to return to local control. My administration will now be using that information—your voices and your lived experiences—to guide our decisions in these three key areas.

At the next opportunity, we asked you to provide input on who will be our next Chief of Police. Through this process, you told us which issues are the most important to our community, you showed up in droves to hear from the top candidates, and together, we welcomed our 39th Chief of Police Oscar Perez. Colonel Perez, please stand.

And when that process was complete, we asked you *again*, to weigh in on the quality of our city services so that we can take a critical look at how to best serve you. Over the course of a month, thousands of you responded, weighing in on which services you used the most and which you felt needed the most improvement. This work has helped us reinvigorate our City Services office, and through this budget we will build a new 3-1-1 system that is efficient for staff and user-friendly for you.

In the last 113 days, you have helped guide us in how to make City Hall an asset to every resident and business owner within our 20 square miles. I want to thank you for getting involved and for trusting in our Administration to get the job done.

Quality City Services

Now, we are going to get Providence back on track and build a focused agenda.

EMBARGOED UNTIL 4/25 AT 6PM - SUBJECT TO MINOR CHANGES UPON DELIVERY

In this Administration, remaining focused will look like simple services being prioritized and done efficiently, on-time, every time. Shortly after she started, our Department of Public Works Director Patricia Coyne-Fague heard from a constituent that no one had ever followed up on her concerns. So she took a walk with that constituent to see what they needed in their neighborhood. Our Public Property Director, Jon Martin, has met with constituents to hear about how we can better address their concerns related to graffiti in our neighborhoods. Our Director of City Services Norelys Consuegra has visited almost every neighborhood association and helps constituents get connected to the right city services, or the right level of government, every day. Our Parks Director Wendy Nilsson is driving a team of dedicated staff members that clean our parks daily and are always finding innovative ways to connect neighborhoods through our greenspaces. I would like to ask all of our Directors to please stand. Can we give them a round of applause for their work?

That is the kind of hands-on, on-the-ground work we're committed to and exactly the kind of high-quality customer service you can expect to see out of City Hall.

And while we work to improve city services, we will also commit to tackling some of the biggest challenges our city faces—like ensuring that all people who want to live in Providence can find a home in our great city. In the next few years, we will build new units across all price points, improve the quality of housing in existing units available and help people break cycles of homelessness by providing wrap-around services in new, accessible, low-income and affordable housing. The budget I am presenting tonight seeks to provide relief to renters who we know have carried the impact of our high commercial taxes. We know too many of our neighbors are burdened by high rent. These properties will see a \$1,900 decrease in their taxes annually which should be passed on to their renters.

This budget also proposes a new housing support coordinator who will work with our partners to provide the appropriate level of response to people who may not have a home—many of whom are also living with mental health or substance use disorders. This position will work across departments to ensure that as a city, we are coordinated in our response to this housing crisis.

And we are also budgeting for an increase to Amos House, for their Hand Up program that provides employment opportunities to residents across our community who may be experiencing homelessness. In addition to this program, Amos House has been working every day since last December to support our neighbors in need at the Cranston Street Armory. Eileen and her team have been there for our community, responding to changing needs throughout every step of this crisis. Her team has stepped up, serving in whatever roles are necessary, and we are so grateful for their work in our city. Eileen, please stand, and let us thank you and your hardworking staff.

In this budget, we are still investing in the right things to improve the local quality of life in every neighborhood. I am also taking this same approach to investing in recreation and making our out-of-school time resources more accessible for our families.

We need to continue investing in education and recreation while we plan for a responsible and successful transition back to local control of our schools. We have heard loud and clear from community members that we need to better communicate and market our afterschool and summer programs for our students. So that every child and family understands their options for robust learn and play opportunities right in their own neighborhood.

EMBARGOED UNTIL 4/25 AT 6PM - SUBJECT TO MINOR CHANGES UPON DELIVERY

That's why this budget continues investments and increases resources to these programs, like PASA and our city recreation centers where so many of our youth connect with adults who care deeply about their success. Under the leadership of our new Recreation Director Stephen Grace, we are better connecting those opportunities and through this budget we will be able to better promote them to our community. I hope that you will join our team, hundreds of providers and partners and thousands of youth and families this Saturday at PCTA for our Summer Opportunities Fair.

This is how we move forward, together, as a community—by offering our residents high-quality city services and taking consistent steps forward in improving our education system. Let's take the next step forward by also strengthening public safety and supports in our public spaces.

Safer City

I am incredibly proud of the progress we've been able to make in Kennedy Plaza in just four months. Data tells us we were experiencing an increase of illegal drugs and overdoses. But by working across agencies- the Department of Health, RIPTA and the Governor's Office- we were able to increase our public safety presence during peak hours so that everyone in our Downtown neighborhood feels safer. We've made Naloxone more accessible to those who need it most, and through the work of partners like WeberRenew, we are providing direct support to folks struggling with substance use disorder. This is just one example of how my Administration is committed to working across agencies to address our biggest challenges—increasing public safety *and* providing better services and supports.

The trust our police department is consistently working to build within our community is also what will make our ATV strategy successful. Our new Community Response Team will be using investigative resources and information from the community to proactively stop riders from reaching our streets, endangering themselves and endangering others. And when ATVs and illegal dirt bikes are out in the street, Providence Police will respond, stop them and hold them accountable for all the danger they present to our city. In just three weeks, our Community Response Team has seized 34 unregistered, illegal vehicles from our streets and we are just getting started.

I look forward to working closely with Colonel Perez and our leadership team to continue to make progress on this and the other public safety challenges we are facing. But to do so, we need to recruit and hire into the Providence Police Department. In this budget, we are requesting funding for a new Police Academy that would bring 30 officers onto the force by October, and bring another 40 into the pipeline for the following spring. And we need to provide these officers better technology to do their jobs well, like enforcing our noise ordinances. Throughout my campaign, I have heard what a problem sound is in our city. Whether it is loud night clubs, modified mufflers, or ATVs—we need to do a better job of respecting and enforcing our own sound rules. This budget increases enforcement, technology and the training that our staff needs, and will hopefully finally provide relief to our neighborhoods.

We are building a Providence that our residents will be proud to call home by prioritizing the issues that make their lives better.

Recession Readiness

In addition to setting a focused agenda, when I took office, I took a serious look at every facet of the City's spending.

What I found was clear: our current system is not sustainable.

EMBARGOED UNTIL 4/25 AT 6PM - SUBJECT TO MINOR CHANGES UPON DELIVERY

In the last three years, one-time federal funding was used to cover budget gaps that now exist without a permanent solution. And just last year, taxes were cut to historic lows, making Providence the 8th lowest property tax rate in the state, even though we service the most people and nearly half of the land is tax exempt.

We are likely on the brink of a recession, and relying on irresponsibly low tax rates will not prepare us for what's ahead.

That's why in addition to a commercial tax decrease, we are also proposing a modest increase to our residential property tax rate, which will still make Providence the 11th lowest in the state. These changes keep us competitive with other communities and ensure that our city has a solid foundation for whatever may come.

This budget shifts us away from reliance on one-time federal dollars being used to fund annual expenses, accounts for a large tax appeal settlement that we inherited, and it fully funds our pension payment which continue to increase by 5 percent every year.

Together, these decisions will set the city up for success over the long-term. But we are also doing our part to sustainably grow the city's tax base.

A critical part of the city's ability to balance its budget lie in the payments in lieu of taxes that we receive from major anchor institutions. For the first time in twenty years, the city has the opportunity to redefine its relationship with these important stakeholders.

This is a top priority of my Administration.

Negotiating PILOT payments that address the demand these big nonprofits have on our city services is an issue of basic fairness and they will have an impact on our city finances for generations to come. That's why in addition to negotiating PILOT payments, we are also pursuing legislation to compensate the city for instances where meds and eds buy buildings and lease them to for-profit entities while being granted tax exemptions. We have also asked the State to provide us a portion of new payroll taxes whenever these institutions grow—so that instead of fighting their growth, we can benefit from it.

The City *needs* these funds, in order to keep paying our bills on time, and to provide the high-quality city services we all deserve. The meds & eds also *need* Providence to be a city where students, doctors, researchers and their employees want to be.

I am more confident than ever that we are putting Providence on the right track.

A Look Ahead

We continue to see bond rating increases, most recently Moody's Investor Services upgrading Providence to an A3 status,

We have built an incredibly talented team of city officials that are dedicated to making Providence the best run city in America,

And we are prepared to take on the difficult challenges that impact Providence and so many cities across the nation: like housing and growing in the new economy.

EMBARGOED UNTIL 4/25 AT 6PM - SUBJECT TO MINOR CHANGES UPON DELIVERY

Because so many of you took me up on it the last time, I want to renew my ask: please stay engaged. We want to hear from you on how we can make Providence a world-class city. I am incredibly proud of the budget we are putting forward today because our community members helped shape it. And there will certainly be more opportunities for you to weigh in and use your voice.

In the years to come, Providence will grow sustainably, and businesses will flourish.

With this budget, I am proud to say that Providence is focused on the right issues.