



CITY OF SALEM, MASSACHUSETTS

Kimberley Driscoll
Mayor

Salem Mayor Kim Driscoll's 2022 State of the City Address April 28, 2022 Salem City Hall

Councillors and guests, it gives me great pleasure to join you this evening to provide a brief update on the state of our City. I'd like to begin my remarks by acknowledging and honoring that the place where we're meeting tonight is – like all of Salem – indigenous land: a place called Naumkeag and home to countless generations of Massachusetts men, women, and children. Even as we approach the 400th anniversary of European arrival here in 1626, let us never lose sight of the important legacy of those who were living here in 1625 and for many generations prior.

While we are in person in City Hall today, for several months we were not able to gather collectively as the pandemic raged for many months that limited our ability for in person meetings and took lives and livelihoods from so many of us.

As such, I would like to ask for a moment of silence in memory of the 111 Salem residents we've lost in the past two years due to COVID. They were parents and grandparents, sisters and brothers, seniors, veterans, and frontline workers. Please join me in honoring our neighbors who are no longer with us because of this deadly virus.

[Moment of silence.]

Thank you.

While the state of our city is strong, and getting stronger every day, our community is poorer for the lives we've lost.

Two years ago, on this date, one of every 124 Salem residents had had COVID. As of today, that number is one of every four. And among Salem Public School students it is nearly one of every three. The trauma – physical, emotional, and mental – educational and economic – certainly will be with us, our children, and our communities for some time.

In 1899 Salem Mayor David Little said, "One of the most important subjects for the welfare of a community is the public health. The greatest care, should be taken to guard rigidly all matters pertaining to it."

I am proud of the efforts we have made here in Salem over the last two years to do just that.

Now, we're rebuilding and recovering from this historic crisis. We're leveraging and investing relief funds sustainably and equitably into programs aimed at improving public health access and

outcomes; strengthening our local economy, supporting renters, workers and families, boosting our public schools, and preparing for future challenges.

Our unemployment rate has returned to its pre-COVID levels. We had no net loss in businesses during the pandemic and our downtown storefront vacancy rate is at a record low - thanks in no small part to our intrepid small business owners, along with the members of our Economic Recovery Task Force and the City staff who have supported them.

I also want to highlight and acknowledge our public health staff and particularly the volunteer service of the members of our Board of Health – experts in the fields of public health and medicine, who made difficult, but appropriate decisions in the face of an overwhelming crisis and public scrutiny. None of them signed up to serve on a Board of Health during a global pandemic. But all of them stood up when their community needed them.

Lastly, enormous credit is due to the members of our school community – teachers, staff, families, administrators, and students alike – who all worked so hard and so unselfishly to keep our kids and teachers safe, to maintain as much learning time as possible, and to support the emotional and mental health needs of Salem students during this trying time.

It's because of COVID – and the Omicron surge in particular – that I'm offering this update to you today, instead of in January as is customary.

For nearly two centuries the leaders of Salem have gathered in this chamber to debate the issues of their day, to celebrate what's been accomplished, to reflect on the lessons we learn in public service, and to chart the path forward for our community. Each time I stand before this body to share an update about the city we all love, I'm reminded of the *first* time I did so as Salem's Mayor.

It's still remarkable to me that I found a home as welcoming as Salem.

I'm a military brat, the daughter of an immigrant from Trinidad and a Navy chef from Lynn, we moved often in my youth as my dad was in service. I was fortunate to land in Salem – first, as a student at Salem State, then as a homeowner and newlywed, then as a mother of the three, a public school parent, a City Councillor and then Salem's 50th Mayor and the first woman to hold this job.

And that first time I stood before the City Council, back in January 2006, I felt that deeply – and I still do today.

Today, however, Salem is in a far better place.

Back then, our budget was a mess; our downtown was lackluster and our waterfront was underutilized. We didn't despair, though. We got to work.

We instituted new measures for transparency, bidding contracts, and reforming health insurance. We opened up government to more people living in our community - whether by inviting their feedback on projects or programs or by serving on a board or commission to help shape new growth. We established financial policies to rebuild our rainy day funds and bond ratings. Today,

both of those very important financial benchmarks are at their highest levels ever in our city's history.

And, because of our stewardship, we've made historic investments in parks, schools, infrastructure, and public safety.

We did this, together, by setting aside the pettiness of political bickering and getting behind a unified vision for a city with a rich history and an even brighter future. We are all - elected officials, institutional leaders, small business owners, new and lifelong residents - Team Salem.

This work continues as we constantly strive to improve how we serve the people we're fortunate to represent – how we meet the needs of today, while maintaining that forward-looking vision that's come to define good municipal government here in Salem.

Together, as local officials, we're on the ground, in our most urgent fights – from COVID response and recovery, to racial equity, the climate crisis, strengthening our public schools, and making housing more affordable.

We're engaging in that work – constructively, thoughtfully, but never timidly. As local leaders, we don't have the luxury of waiting for problems to solve themselves. We have to get stuff done every day. Because great communities don't happen by accident. They take careful, intentional, and inclusive planning and dedicated action. It's not always easy, and it's often messy, but it's truly meaningful work. We get to make a positive difference in the daily lives of the people we serve - our friends and neighbors.

I'm proud of the vision we have for our community – one that is inclusive, just, professionally run, and committed to the people we serve. And I hope you are, too.

Because of the foundation and work underway, four years from now our nearly 400-year-old city, will enter 2026 well positioned as a community that serves as a hub for offshore wind operations throughout the Northeast, once again utilizing our historic port to bring prominence and jobs to our local economy, not to mention a clean energy future for Massachusetts.

A city where, every four-year-old will have the ability to participate in a high-quality pre-k setting and our high school students will continue to have engaging and robust college and career pathways better preparing them for the 21st century global economy they will be entering into.

A city with robust transportation alternatives including well utilized ride share, car share, and bike share options, where you don't need to own your own vehicle to get in and around Salem and cleaner, faster rail if you're heading north or south.

A city working toward right sized housing supply for every resident, regardless of age or income.

The work we do now will help lead and ensure we deliver on our goals for 2026.

In 1920, my predecessor, Mayor Denis Sullivan, stood in this same place to deliver his annual address to the City Council.

Mayor Sullivan was our 40th Mayor, but the first Mayor under the revised City Charter that we still operate under today.

It had been a tumultuous period for Salem. In 1914 the Great Fire destroyed much of the city and left 18,000 residents homeless.

Shortly after that, scores of young men from Salem marched off to war in Europe, many never to return. Their names today are etched on stones at Greenlawn and above City squares dedicated in their honor.

Perhaps most alike to today, though, was the arrival of a devastating pandemic in 1918.

While there's no clear count of how many Salem residents perished from that catastrophe, the number who became sick was likely in the thousands. According to Salem Hospital's annual report, that year there was a 40% increase in admissions. Doctors and nurses were in short supply and many themselves fell ill. As many as one of every three patients admitted to the hospital due to the pandemic died.

The Saint Chretienne Convent and School in South Salem was converted to an emergency isolation site, similar to how we created emergency quarantine sites at the Bates dorms at south campus, just next door, and at Salem High School and Lifebridge.

The Special Aid Society, originally formed to assist the war effort, pivoted to help with pandemic response to residents in need, similar to the Salem Together effort we launched at the outset of COVID.

And, just as hundreds of Salem residents in the last two years volunteered to drive to get groceries and prescriptions for homebound residents and to place well-being calls to check in on older adults in Salem – in 1918 Salem residents volunteered the use of their automobiles for nurses at Salem Hospital who needed fresh air and a change of scenery when in quarantine.

It was in the wake of all this that Mayor Sullivan stood before the Council 102 years ago and observed: "Salem has always courageously and fearlessly met every obligation... [For] to help the afflicted is one of the greatest blessings bestowed on mankind."

He recognized, too, however, that merely lauding the accomplishments of the past was not sufficient: Salem must remain committed to the work to come.

He closed his remarks with this charge to the Council: "Let our sole aim be to attain the highest possible improvement of our city... Let our every public act be a credit to our city, true to the high standards and traditions of our people, and consistent with the ideal type of the American public official."

He was right and I echo his words here today to renew that call to all of us. As we set to work on the people's business, let's keep striving for that highest possible improvement of our city, for acts worthy of the community we love and the rightly high standards of the people we serve.

Together, let's lead Salem forward for everyone. Thank you for your work and your partnership!