

MAYOR STEVEN M. FULOP



2016

STATE OF THE CITY ADDRESS

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Good evening, and welcome to our third State of the City together.

I want to thank you for joining me to discuss some topics that are very personal to me and, I know, very important to you.

But first, I want to thank the public officials from the state and the county who have joined us tonight; members of the clergy; members of the court; the Jersey City Council who have been partners in everything we do; fellow members of my administration; and, most importantly, the residents of this great city.

Thank you for joining us for our third State of the City address.

Tonight, I'm going to talk about how we protect the things that make Jersey City the special community we all know and love.

As we hear about Jersey City at a time of divisive national presidential politics, those of us who live here understand Jersey City is truly a community of harmony.

This is the place that peacefully greeted thousands of immigrants from foreign lands.

This is the place of endless potential and boundless dreams.

And this is the place that, today, is pushing government to new frontiers of innovation.

Tonight, I want to talk about how we plan to move our city forward as we continue to push the boundaries of greatness.

Every day, as I travel throughout our city, I am excited by how far we have come in the past few years and I am energized thinking about where we will go from here.

I have always championed the notion of 'One Jersey City,' where every resident, from the Hudson to the Hackensack, has the opportunity to build a safe and happy home for themselves and their families.

We have continued to work hard to prove that the best things about our city do not start and stop at the waterfront, and that regardless of ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or income, every resident will be able to live a healthy, productive life here in Jersey City.

Over the last year, we have been at the forefront of social issues ranging from transgender rights, when we became one of the first cities in the country to expand trans-inclusive healthcare coverage to our city employees, to education, as the Jersey City Public School District is about to regain local control over our schools from the state of New Jersey for the first time in 27 years.

We also delivered on our promise to increase accountability and efficiency within our administration through the consolidation of the Jersey City Incinerator Authority within the city's Department of Public Works, saving millions of dollars for our taxpayers.

While these important policy changes have helped move the city forward, we have also experienced many changes that directly affect the everyday lives of our residents.

Our economy has continued its unparalleled growth over the past year, and the progress we have made has been remarkable. The city has added over 3,500 jobs, opened over 300 new small businesses, and reduced unemployment to a 25-year low of 4.1%, all within the last year alone.

In 2015, we had nearly 7,000 residential units under construction – more than anywhere else in New Jersey and a record for Jersey City itself.

However, we also wanted to ensure that residents of all income levels could benefit from the new development.

So we are creating affordable housing units across the entire city, with as many affordable units created in the last two years as in the last 8 years combined.

We have also begun construction on Jersey City's first veteran housing project – something that is particularly close to my heart.

As a city, we have signed on to First Lady Michelle Obama's Challenge to End Veteran Homelessness, and I am proud we are moving forward on projects that provide for our veterans.

We have also made great progress on development in Journal Square, including what will be one of the largest residential towers in the city, and one that will bring new life and new opportunities back to Journal Square.

We brought a full-service bank back to the HUB for the first time since 2010, something that the community both needed and deserved.

We welcomed Citi Bike's bike-share program to Jersey City, and within six months we have seen nearly 75,000 trips taken throughout the city.

And later this spring we will open our new flagship park, Berry Lane Park, in the heart of Bergen-Lafayette.

This past year, we also launched the city's United Rescue program – the first community-based emergency response network in the United States.

And, later this month, Detroit, Michigan will become the first city to follow our lead by announcing plans for a similar lifesaving system.

Jersey City has been a leader in 2015 and we will continue to lead in 2016 and beyond.

It's important to underscore that we have been able to accomplish all of this while keeping taxes flat for three years in a row.

We have continued to champion the idea that if we implement programs efficiently and effectively, government can work, and as we have seen, it can work well.

But even as we make progress on these fronts, it is absolutely essential that we remember that the foundation for each and every one of our successes is the safety of our residents.

Public safety is the prerequisite for new parks, for residential developments, and for innovative transportation systems.

It is the nucleus of our growth. Without safe streets, we cannot possibly build the strong, vibrant city that we are working towards every day.

After all, what good are new jobs if people don't feel safe going to work in the morning or coming home at night?

Every day at 5am, the first thing I do is get an update on any violence that occurred in the city or surrounding areas.

Nothing pains me more than knowing that the life of a community member was taken due to an act of violence in Jersey City.

Each resident's life is priceless, and I hold myself personally responsible for every act of violence that occurs within our city.

I took an oath when I began my journey in the Marine Corps, and again when I was sworn in as Mayor of this city.

Both of these pledges point to an obligation to protect the lives of each and every citizen and I take these oaths very seriously.

Knowing how valuable each resident's life is, we have taken aggressive steps to combat crime.

While tonight I am proud to report that Jersey City is the safest urban area in New Jersey, I also know we have much more work to do.

We have had a double-digit percentage decrease in violent crimes since I took office, as well as impressive reductions in nearly all crime categories based on the statistics.

Assaults are down 17% and aggravated assaults are down 14%. Robberies are down 23% and burglaries are down 16%.

There have been fewer shootings since the beginning of my term, and last year we recovered over 200 guns, representing a 13% increase in guns recovered from the previous year.

I can point to statistics, but the reality is that, as Mark Twain famously once said, “there are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics.”

While these facts are indisputable, I know we face the sobering reality of gun violence in our community.

For example, we recently made 12 gun arrests in one weekend – half of which were juveniles.

Clearly, there is a breakdown in society when so many young people have access to guns.

However, this epidemic isn't unique to Jersey City. It is affecting communities throughout the nation.

Every single urban mayor in the country understands this and must deal with this challenge on a daily basis.

So tonight we won't focus on the challenges or statistics, but on the tangible changes we are making to build a safer city.

Often, I walk the streets of Jersey City and get feedback from residents, which is the most helpful and meaningful way to assess our progress.

This is something that no statistic can capture: the comfort of the senior citizen from Greenville who is walking to the corner store for the first time in years without fear, or the optimism of the Journal Square resident who can walk home from the PATH late at night without hesitation or feeling of danger.

A change in perception can't be measured or quantified, but I assure you it exists. While we are far from perfect, we are continuing to make great strides.

Make no mistake: despite occasional challenges, we are winning the fight against crime here in Jersey City. And tonight we are renewing our commitment publicly to this fight, and I assure you that we will never lose focus on protecting each and every resident in this city.

The root causes of criminal behavior are often complicated, I'm sure you agree.

Solutions are not always easy and sometimes progress comes slower than anticipated. But we are making progress with strategies on several fronts.

First, open dialogue is crucial. This means better communication between the city and the public is our first critical step in our approach to public safety. In the fall of last year, we saw an uptick in crime, prompting us to begin engaging in conversations with residents about crime, concerns, and potential solutions.

These types of conversations are most productive when everyone has the facts, and we have emphasized the importance of providing open data and complete information throughout this process.

The Jersey City Open Data Portal on the city website allows us to proactively provide the public with unfiltered and unbiased information on crime and other police activities throughout the city.

We are trying to break down the informational barriers between government and residents in order to encourage honest dialogue aimed at increased public safety.

Second, in addition to data, we are focused on structural changes to our personnel. When we took office, we recognized the importance of a strong and dedicated department aimed at building a safer city.

One of our first steps towards establishing an effective administration was to hire a dynamic and knowledgeable public safety Director, Jim Shea, and we thank Jim for all of his efforts.

We also appointed Police Chief Philip Zacche who joined Fire Chief Darren Rivers.

And in an effort to eliminate redundant costs and increase efficiency, we merged the Police and Fire Departments to create the Department of Public Safety. As we took office, we were determined to streamline our efforts, reduce costs, and make our approach to public safety as powerful as possible.

Furthermore, we started a Cease Fire Unit to investigate and give priority to non-fatal shootings. This was an area of policing where we thought we could make more progress.

The strong investigative work by our Cease Fire detectives is helping to close cases quickly, and most importantly, prevent additional shootings before they happen.

Since its creation in 2013, the Cease Fire Unit has made arrests at a significantly higher rate than the state average.

While the Cease Fire Unit has been successful, we also knew we had to increase our manpower on the ground.

When we took office our police force was near historic lows in manpower.

Since then, we have hired more than 150 officers to help close this gap.

A total of 55 new officers joined the force in 2015 and 110 more are currently in training in the police academy.

By the end of my first term, it is our goal to have 900 police officers in Jersey City.

Yet, simply hiring more officers is not enough. We have made it a priority for our police officers to reflect the people they serve.

At the time we took office, the police department only had one African American officer above the rank of patrolman.

This racial exclusivity ran counter to the mission of our administration, and we have proven our determination to change this.

As America's 'Golden Door', we have always had a history of welcoming people from all backgrounds and walks of life.

Jersey City's diversity and history is something we are proud of, and we wanted to reflect this in the police officers we hire and promote.

We have begun to actively recruit officers from a variety of backgrounds, and are continuing to use the Marine Corps recruiting model to ensure that our police department reflects the true diversity of the city.

Jersey City is now considered a national model for police diversity. As a result, I am proud to report that nearly 70% of the new officers hired since 2013 have been minorities.

The third significant change in our Policing strategy, in addition to transparency of data and personnel changes, is our investment in our public safety facilities and infrastructure.

Jersey City was proud to open this year the new West District police precinct named in honor of fallen police Detective Melvin Santiago.

This facility represents the city's first new police station since 1954.

The precinct will serve as a memorial to Detective Santiago and the 37 other Jersey City police officers who have lost their lives in the line of duty since 1880.

We are also building a new police headquarters, which will be the first in the country located in federal public housing.

We are excited about the new facility for our police leadership, as well as the opportunity to provide a 24-hour police presence in this community, creating a model for other cities as well.

This is a historic and unprecedented move that will benefit Jersey City for a long time to come.

Finally, I want to give credit to Ward C Councilman Rich Boggiano for championing the re-opening of the Jersey City police academy, which we intend to make a reality.

The previous administration closed the academy, unfortunately leading to a shortage of opportunities for training new officers. We are committed to reversing this mistake.

Whether it is more officers, more transparency, or better facilities, public safety will continue to be our main focus in 2016.

We will add more walking posts throughout the city, we will continue to hire more officers, and we will build community relationships based on trust.

This year, that trust will be strengthened in a couple key ways, starting with our great relationship with the new Hudson County Prosecutor, Esther Suarez.

We have a great dialogue with her office and together we are working to stiffen penalties for violent offenders and ensure they are prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law so they don't return to the streets and commit repeat offenses.

When the community understands that their partnership will result in the most violent criminals being removed from our neighborhoods, we know community members will be more willing to share sensitive information.

We are also building trust through technology. We are moving forward to equip our men and women in uniform with body cameras.

Last week, we began the deployment of body cameras to be worn by our on-duty, uniformed officers in Jersey City.

These cameras will provide video and audio recordings of interactions between police and civilians, enhancing transparency, accountability, and professionalism. More importantly, they will help us build trust.

For us at City Hall, we know it is more than just statistics that make us the safest city in the region.

Rather, it is every single action taken on this front that is making Jersey City the safest large city in New Jersey.

Thinking of ways to make Jersey City safer is the single issue we are most passionate about. However, it is important to note that our approach to creating a safer city has been a holistic one. It is no coincidence that we also have the lowest unemployment rate of any large city in the state.

According to the most recent figures, Jersey City's unemployment rate was 4.1%, representing stronger job growth than anywhere in the region.

In the time since we took office, we have added over 6,000 new jobs in both small and large businesses in a variety of sectors.

We see the link between increased economic opportunities and decreases in crime, and we have taken steps to bring these solutions to the neighborhoods that need them most.

The newly formed Office of Innovation is focused on revitalizing neighborhood business districts outside of downtown, specifically targeting MLK Drive, Ocean Avenue, Monticello Avenue, West Side Avenue, and Central Avenue.

Our aim is to bring businesses and jobs back to these once booming commercial hubs by creating vibrant main streets that welcome visitors and deter crime.

We have incentivized businesses to invest in neighborhoods by providing financing for small businesses, including the \$10 million dollar Jersey City Fund program, which offers entrepreneurs even more flexibility to succeed.

We will also continue to expand the resources necessary to help small businesses thrive, including professional development classes and a new small business portal.

Earlier this year, the City Council passed an ordinance creating the Office of Diversity and Inclusion in order to encourage minority- and women-owned businesses as partners in city contracts.

The Office will provide training, seminars, and workshops aimed at giving these business owners the tools needed to become city vendors and service providers.

It is our hope that this initiative will encourage the growth of our minority- and women-owned businesses, while also working to foster inclusive neighborhoods and increase the diversity of the city's small businesses.

Having safer neighborhoods has led to the emergence of new businesses throughout our city – from the Heights to Bergen-Lafayette to Greenville to West Side.

But there is still much more work to be done, and our progress will depend on all of us working together as one.

As important as it is to ensure that business owners and job seekers have the resources they need to succeed, we have also continued to stress the importance of providing valuable and positive opportunities to our city's youth.

Throughout the last two years we have implemented programs that engage children and teenagers throughout the city in recreation, arts, mentoring, and professional development.

Providing opportunities for the city's youth to learn a new skill or gain practical work experience can be transformative, for both the student and the community.

Community engagement is key – whether it takes shape through supporting new small businesses on MLK Drive or involving thousands of teenagers in the Jersey City Summer Works program.

I am incredibly proud of the sense of commitment and community I see in Jersey City every day, and it is something we will continue to encourage.

As we all have come to learn, public safety is a group effort, and we cannot do this alone. We must all be vigilant and proactive in addressing the causes of criminal activity, and we must unify our efforts as one community – as one city. If we work together, crime will not stand a chance.

We are very optimistic about our future. Whether it is the one hundred residents who volunteered to shovel snow for their senior neighbors as part of JC Shovels, or the one thousand residents who will become volunteer emergency responders through United Rescue, the people of Jersey City inspire us every day.

Since day one of our administration, we have been focused on building a safer, more welcoming city.

Public safety is the foundation upon which any other success must rest. Without it, we would not be seeing the scale of investment we have seen over the last year. Without a strong vision for public safety, we wouldn't be on track to become the largest city in New Jersey in the next few years.

I am committed to making this city even safer and in ways that go beyond statistics. I am committed to building that sentiment of safety for all of our residents, in all of our neighborhoods, that no statistic can capture.

That is why we have started building a diverse police force to walk neighborhoods and build relationships with the community.

It is why we plan to move our police headquarters to federal public housing.

It is why we have started to utilize crime data to more effectively deploy our officers at the times and locations that need them most.

It is why we merged police and fire into one new Department of Public Safety.

And it is why we have engaged in transparent and productive community meetings in each ward.

But the work is not done and I know we will continue to improve. It is hard work but we will come together as one great, safe, and united community. We will come together as one Jersey City and together we will ensure that bright days lie ahead. Thank you and God Bless Jersey City.