



## City of Racine Mayor Cory Mason

### State of the City Address

August 12, 2020

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Good evening.

President Tate II, members of the Common Council, City Staff, and my fellow Racine residents, thank you for joining me tonight for my annual State of the City Address.

These are unprecedented times. Unlike past years where we've gathered together in Council Chambers for this assessment of the state of our City, tonight, I speak to you and our community virtually. We're eight months into 2020, and for all of us in Racine - indeed, for most Americans - this year has been hard and filled with challenges.

Former First Lady Michelle Obama says, "You should never view your challenges as a disadvantage. Instead, it's important for you to understand that your experience facing and overcoming adversity is actually one of your biggest advantages." That is wise advice, and a good reminder that our collective work to overcome the challenges we're facing will - I hope - become one of our advantages.

Between COVID-19 and the accompanying economic hardship and uncertainty, declining revenues, and the designation as one of the worst places in the country for African Americans to live, we do indeed face significant challenges. And 2020's challenges have been unrelenting: In January, we were hit by a storm that decimated areas of our lakefront so badly that the federal government declared it an emergency. Shortly after that, the City was hit with a devastating cyber-attack that crippled city information systems. In March, COVID-19 became real to the City of Racine as our first residents became ill. As of today, 2,034 City residents have contracted this virus. Thirty-one City residents have died from it. Each of these cases was someone's family, friend, or neighbor. And earlier this summer, the brutal murder of George Floyd at the hands of police officers in Minneapolis was so appalling that the entire nation, including thousands of Racine residents, stood up to demand an end to police brutality along with justice and equality for Black lives.

Last year, I told you that my administration's priorities can be summed up as: equity, sustainability, and innovation through Smart Cities. Those are still our priorities, but in 2020, the ground has shifted beneath our feet. I stand before you tonight to say: to rise to this occasion and overcome the obstacles we face, we must prioritize, we must adapt, and we must innovate.

To know where we are going, we must first remind ourselves of the extraordinary context in which we find ourselves:

## CORONAVIRUS

As I speak to you via virtual meeting, and as residents watch it on Facebook Live, I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge the ways Coronavirus has already changed our lives and express my gratitude for the numerous ways our City residents and City staff have responded.

COVID-19 has made us consider how our actions impact others, what responsibility we have to our neighbors, and how we think about our community.

COVID-19 has made us rethink what essential work means. Which workplaces needed to be open, and if they were open, what a safe workplace looked like. Coronavirus has dramatically altered what schooling looks like, requiring parents to both figure out how to effectively do their jobs remotely and become teachers to their children. We've had to tell people to stay home, to wear masks, to keep distance from each other, and not see our loved ones. Even going to church and how we worship is different.

As Mayor, I never anticipated that so many of our community members would be enlisted to put the weight of a pandemic on their shoulders and carry us through these extraordinary times. Our grocery and pharmacy employees, sanitation workers, first responders in police and fire, and healthcare professionals have all been on the frontlines of this pandemic. We owe them all a debt of gratitude and appreciation.

As a City, we have had to overcome tremendous challenges to manage this virus's spread. I am proud of the decisions we have made to put public health over politics and to help our residents weather these uncertain times:

- Our Public Health Department has developed, implemented, and enforced local health orders to keep "Safer at Home" protections in place after the State Supreme Court eliminated statewide protections. While we have not yet defeated COVID-19 locally, these local health orders and the hard work of our public health staff have all helped to significantly limit the impact of COVID-19 in our community and protect our essential workers and first responders. We owe tremendous thanks and appreciation to our Public Health Administrator Dottie-Kay Bowersox and her staff in the Public Health Department who have all worked tirelessly to keep our community safe from this pandemic.
- Our Clerk's office, led by City Clerk Tara Coolidge, has now successfully administered two elections during this pandemic. This is an amazing feat that has ensured that, in Racine, access to the ballot box was not hindered by even a global public health crisis. The Clerk's staff has been creative, innovative, and nimble. Their efforts are a remarkable testament to the City's commitment to maintaining our democracy, and we should all be incredibly proud of their efforts.
- We didn't stop our elections-related innovation after the April election. The City of Racine brought the state's five largest cities together to prepare the Wisconsin Safe Voting Plan and successfully applied for funding from the Center for Tech and Civic Life. In total, Wisconsin received more than \$6 million in grant funding, with more than \$1 million dollars coming directly to Racine, so that we can all be prepared to administer safe, secure, and accessible elections in November.

- The devastating and unparalleled health impacts of COVID-19 are matched by the economic impacts. We were the first City in the State to create and deploy resources to help our small, local businesses and their employees get through this crisis. Thanks to the leadership and diligent work of our Development and Neighborhood Services staff, we put nearly \$1 million into the community through our Small Business Emergency Fund. Ultimately, those funds provided much needed and rapid response to 164 City of Racine-based businesses.
- We've taken action to help community residents struggling with the implications of layoffs and business shut-downs. Thousands of Racine residents are struggling to keep up with rent as they wait for unemployment insurance checks to arrive and face reduced or uncertain work hours. Again, we acted quickly and creatively. In order to prevent evictions and homelessness among our most vulnerable residents, we partnered with Lutheran Social Services to create the Racine Emergency Eviction Prevention Program which will help hundreds of low-income City residents stay in their homes. I have proposed that we put additional federal funds into this effort to prevent Racine residents from facing eviction due to COVID-19's impacts on their paychecks.
- When the Racine County Food Bank needed help building and filling food boxes for area families in need, City staff from the Library and Parks departments put on masks, rolled up their sleeves, and stepped up to fill the need. They made 1,000 family food boxes for distribution in our community. Similarly, City staff, including our summer Parks Playground Leaders, worked cheerfully in the hot summer sun to make a drive-through COVID-19 Care Package distribution event at our Cesar Chavez Community Center a success.
- Our Library found new ways to be available to our residents even as the Library itself is closed, and implemented curbside library pickup.
- As part of a research study from Cornell and the Medical College of Wisconsin, our firefighters and EMTs are helping to utilize and test a new COVID-19 screening that provides results in hours, not days. The benefits of this new screening protocol could be used around the country and we should all be proud that Racine is on the cutting edge of this research.

I have been impressed and humbled as, again and again, City employees have stepped up and taken on additional and sometimes non-traditional roles in the community to help our residents weather this storm.

I am proud of our responses to this pandemic. But this crisis is far from over. As we move into the fall, I renew my call for our staff and our residents to stay the course and do everything possible to prevent the spread of the virus in our community. We cannot let politics dictate the response to a public health crisis and ultimately slow our road to recovery. Masks are not political statements. Practicing social distancing is not an attack on anyone's freedom. These are temporary, responsible, and science-driven public health measures. Our decisions will continue to be based on the best available science and public health guidance, and it is everyone's responsibility to not act selfishly so that we can get back to a sense of normalcy as soon as possible.

If we want our kids safely back in schools, our economy to recover, and for people to remain healthy, the fastest way through the pandemic is for everyone in the community to do their part. Our nation has a history of together, rising through great challenges. The enemy we're facing is not each other, it is COVID-19, and we can only defeat it by each doing our own part to protect our neighbors.

## ADDRESSING INEQUITIES

The pandemic has also shone a bright spotlight on inequalities and disparities that were already present in our community. Though our daily priorities have had to dramatically shift to ensure proper emergency response to the public health crisis, we have continued our work to respond to the structural inequities that hold too many of our City's residents back from opportunity and prosperity. Racine's diversity is one of our community's greatest assets. Near the end of 2019, Racine County once again landed on the list of worst places in the country for African Americans. We had already begun intensive strategic work to address the metrics used in that analysis, and as we move forward, we will increasingly focus on realigning and re-envisioning our programs, services, and resources to meaningfully improve opportunities for our residents of color.

One definition of insanity is to do the same things over and over again and expect different results. I refuse to do that. We must pioneer new approaches and be willing to try new things. I am committed to moving our City in a new direction, and, even with the economic and public health crises we are facing, recommit this administration to addressing these inequities. These are county-wide challenges that require county-wide solutions, however while I'm your Mayor, the City will do everything we can to improve and increase minority homeownership, health outcomes, high school graduation rates, financial resiliency, and quality rental housing. These are priorities of my administration and, I hope, of our City Council.

Bringing about significant change in these areas will require creativity, partnerships, and realignment of our resources. It will force difficult decisions. However, if we care about creating an equitable City for all of our residents, we have to do hard things, especially now when so many of our residents are struggling to navigate COVID-19's economic realities.

We have already begun this work, and in the rest of 2020, we will see major progress:

- As the pandemic has made abundantly clear, we have alarming disparities in health outcomes locally that must be addressed. For too long, Racine has been the largest City in the Midwest without a community health clinic. That will change this year when we officially open the Racine Community Health Center at Julian Thomas Elementary School. The Racine Unified School District has put more than one million dollars into renovations to transform the school's garden level into an amazing space for this much-needed health center. Our partners at RUSD, Racine County, the United Way of Racine County, Ascension Wisconsin, Gateway Technical College, and others have all come together in an unprecedented collaboration to make this project a reality. I have proposed that the City devote federal funds to the Center so it can open this year, and with Council's approval next week, we will be able to open the Center in 2020 and begin to meaningfully address Racine residents' primary health care needs.
- I am also proposing that we deploy federal funds to prevent foreclosure and protect home ownership in the City. We have exciting work ahead of us to improve home ownership opportunities, and I will not stand back and watch hard won homeownership gains disappear due to COVID-19. We will be directing more than \$500,000 to assist City homeowners whose incomes have been hit by COVID-19 so they can catch up on their mortgages and stay in their

homes. Similarly, in partnership with the Racine Continuum of Care, we will put additional funds directly into the community to protect tenants from eviction.

- We are pursuing multiple tracks to create more pathways to home ownership for City residents. In partnership with Housing Resources, Inc. and a coalition of more than 14 other community partners, the City will launch the Racine Financial Empowerment Center later this year. The FEC will provide our residents with free, professional, one-on-one financial counseling to improve credit scores, reduce debt, and build savings. The FEC will not only help Racine's residents become more financially resilient, it will make home ownership an achievable reality.
- We will also continue our work to ensure that residents have the education and skills training they need to support their families and prosper. Thanks to a grant from Bloomberg Philanthropies, City staff have brought partners together to expand the YWCA's free and effective adult high school diploma program. We directed some of these grant resources to the YWCA to ensure they had the technology necessary to continue the program virtually during the coronavirus pandemic. It is these kinds of partnerships and hard work that will change outcomes for Racine residents well into the future.
- We continue to invest and prioritize our efforts to revitalize our City's neighborhoods and, even in the face of strict state law constraints, protect and assist renters. Nearly half of our City's residents are tenants, and while we hope to encourage and support many of these tenants in becoming homeowners, we must also ensure that rental housing in Racine is safe and healthy. In last year's budget, the Common Council adopted the Racine Rental Empowerment and Neighborhood Tenant Services, or RENTS, ordinances. The goal, quite simply, is to improve housing quality throughout the City. Implementing the RENTS Initiative has been a major undertaking, slowed by the cyber-attack and COVID, but still resulting in remarkable collaboration between many City departments. Robust implementation of RENTS is a continued priority as we work to stabilize and improve our housing stock.

We will continue to aggressively pursue philanthropic grant resources, opportunities to strategically utilize federal funds, and collaborative partnerships to directly address the inequities that have plagued our community for too long. Our laser-like focus on expanding homeownership, improving health care outcomes, improving rental housing, increasing financial resiliency, and ensuring access to education and training will transform the economic prosperity and mobility of our City's residents.

## POLICE REFORM

As much as our public health department has been tested this year, so too has our police department, albeit for different reasons.

In a tumultuous and historic year with many developments around police, it is impossible to begin without acknowledging the announcement of Art Howell's retirement as our Chief of Police. After 36 years of service to the Racine Police Department, Chief Howell will retire at the end of the year, giving us time to find a successor. While eventually there will be a new chief, there will never be another Chief Howell. He leaves a legacy as a home-grown Chief, as Racine's first chief of color, of historically low rates of serious crime, and the success of his community oriented policing vision that has now expanded far beyond its initial concept. His legacy has changed the department and the City for the better. We thank Art Howell for his service to our City.

Every day, our police officers do important, and often dangerous work. Just last summer we lost Officer John Hetland in the line of duty keeping fellow residents safe in the midst of an armed robbery. The work that the police department has done, particularly around the Community Oriented Policing or COP model can be seen in the transformation at Anthony Lane and in every neighborhood in our City where a COP house has been established.

But the murder of George Floyd at the hands of police officers in Minneapolis was a clarion cry for action against racism and for an end to police brutality around the nation. That cry was heard here in the City of Racine and we saw largely peaceful protests and demonstrations all over the City.

While the issue of police reform was not on our minds at the start of 2020, the nation was forever changed after witnessing the murder of George Floyd, and so Racine too must act locally to take a hard look in the mirror at how and who we police, and we must be willing to adapt and change.

I accepted the challenge posed to the nation's mayors by former President Obama and took immediate actions to engage our residents and make necessary reforms to policing. I created the Mayor's Task Force on Police Reform which is doing the hard work of examining and making recommendations about our use of force policies and how to best ensure resident oversight. The Task Force work has been supplemented with virtual community conversations and an online survey, all aimed at gathering residents' experiences with the Racine Police Department and residents' vision for the future of policing in our community. We are learning a lot – the good and the bad – about how our residents perceive police in the City, and these conversations and the Task Force's recommendations will inform policy decisions that we will seek to make and implement still this year and into 2021.

## ACCOMPLISHMENTS

While I reflect on the state of our City, it is clear that the challenges are front of mind. This has been a difficult year so far. But in addition to all of the work we've done to manage the harmful effects of the pandemic, and our continued initiatives to address disparities, we have accomplished other notable achievements this year, even in the face of these historic challenges:

- Construction was completed at Gold Medal Lofts, a 77-unit affordable multifamily project, which is currently leasing and beginning occupancy. The same developer just began construction at the Historic Horlick District located on Northwestern Avenue, to transform two amazing buildings into a new 136-unit multifamily development. At the Horlick site, this is phase one of hopefully several that will transform the currently empty Horlick campus into a destination with beautiful housing, breweries and restaurants, and co-working spaces.
- Across town, in the Uptown neighborhood, we also have cranes in the sky at the Ajax site where a 54-unit affordable multifamily building and an 87-unit market rate building are both currently under construction. The Ajax project is the first new multifamily housing and first new market rate construction in the City of Racine in a generation.
- Development projects like these, and others that are in the pipeline, will be a major focus of the City's work in 2021. I am delighted that City Assessor Bill Bowers agreed last week to also take on the role of Director of City Development. With Bill's leadership, we will prioritize net new

construction and getting shovels in the ground and cranes in the sky to rebuild Racine and enhance our future economic growth.

- We have also continued to move forward on our goals to decrease our carbon footprint and be more sustainable as a City. We've recently entered into an agreement with We Energies to build a 600 kilowatt ground mount solar array at Olsen Prairie Park, which will generate sustainable energy for our residents and more than \$25,000 in new revenue each year for 30 years for the City.
- We were awarded more than \$3 million dollars from the U.S. Department of Transportation to buy electric buses. I am proud to say that the only city in Wisconsin to receive one of these grants was the City of Racine. Those funds will allow us to purchase 9 electric buses and associated charging infrastructure. That is a big win for reducing our carbon footprint.
- We've implemented a new, more efficient solid waste and recycling collection system under the leadership of Public Works Commissioner John Rooney.
- We hired a new Human Resources Director and welcomed Kate Crouteau's expertise to our team.
- Our Deputy Finance Director, Kathleen Fischer, stepped up to take on dual duties as Interim City Administrator, bringing her expertise to an even wider array of critically important City projects and priorities.
- We've continued our Smart City efforts by collaborating with Gateway Technical College and the University of Wisconsin-Madison to bring mobility innovations to the City of Racine.

And City of Racine voters themselves made something extraordinary happen this year when they overwhelmingly supported the Racine Unified School District Referendum. I know the vote is much closer when you include the surrounding villages. But City voters showed they care about investing in our kids. The benefit of that referendum will mean new schools for our community's children, updates to every school building in the City, better learning environments, access to technology, and the expansion of supportive services. City voters carried the day, and that vote will have lasting impacts in creating better educational opportunities for the City's kids well into the future.

## BUDGET REALITIES

Tonight I have spoken with you about our challenges, about our priorities, and reminded you about the good work still being done here in the City. There is so much about the State of our City that is strong, thriving, resilient, and creative.

But I opened these remarks by noting that, to overcome the significant challenges we are facing, we must prioritize, we must adapt, we must innovate. Particularly as we begin to put the annual City budget together, those concepts must be our guiding principles.

Let me be clear: this budget will force us to make increasingly difficult decisions.

The last two years, we have been able to put together budgets that did not force us to make cuts to services or lay off City employees. In our last two budgets we used every tool at our disposal, and to be frank, this year, we are out of tools. We have a large structural budget deficit to address. Like most cities in Wisconsin and across the nation, COVID's economic realities have worsened our budget

situation. We have less general operating revenue coming into the City, and our expenses continue to rise. State levy limits and expenditure constraints imposed by Scott Walker are made worse by the challenges we face in growing the tax base because we are land-locked by our suburban neighbors.

Net new construction is our only tool to significantly increase revenues, and while we are beginning to see new construction on developments happen, none of that revenue will be available for another full calendar year.

Former Vice President Joe Biden once said, “Don’t tell me what you value, show me your budget, and I’ll tell you what you value.”

The budget I will present to you in just a few weeks will be a reflection of the priorities and values I have outlined here tonight. It will focus on reducing the inequities that exist in this City and not leaving any residents behind. It will focus on development, because net new construction is key to our future financial stability. It will continue our prioritization of sustainability and Smart City investments that position Racine for a new, brighter future.

But today’s fiscal realities mean that we cannot continue to operate as we have in the past. We must prioritize, we must adapt, we must innovate. The budget team will be working with all departments to find efficiencies. We will explore realignments, reorganizations, and shifting of responsibilities. As we enter into a tough budget cycle, what we have learned from implementing RENTS is that departmental silos and duplications sometimes hinder collaboration and effectiveness. Our staff in multiple departments have responded admirably to these cross-departmental initiatives, and in the budget, we will explore how to best re-align departments to maximize these collaborative innovations.

And as much as it pains me, Alders and the public should be prepared to see a budget with fewer City positions. We have implemented a hiring freeze, and as positions become open, we will carefully evaluate each one.

We are also closely examining the services and organizations we traditionally fund with federal dollars that are not core city functions or that do not fall into these priority areas. I want to make it clear to many of our partner organizations that if they have traditionally received an allocation of federal funds from the City in the past, you should not assume you are getting that allocation again in 2021. Our budget simply can’t afford it, and outside of our central work to address the inequities discussed here tonight, we can no longer sustain it at the same level.

These fiscal realities are sobering, to be sure. But I know that by working together, by prioritizing, innovating, and adapting, we will overcome the challenges that 2020 has thrown at us, and we will emerge stronger for it.

## CONCLUSION

I will conclude tonight by saying that even in these tough times, Racine has still accomplished great things. Remember, this year we faced natural disasters, a cyber-security attack, and a global pandemic. But we didn’t cower, or hide, or throw up our hands and say that this is too hard. Again and again, we have stepped up. City employees have gone above and beyond to still provide services,



innovate in numerous areas, protect and serve our residents, and accomplish big things. Neighbors have checked in on each other, residents have donated to help families in need, businesses have adapted to changing realities. We wear masks and forgo our normal hugs and handshakes to keep each other safe and healthy.

John F. Kennedy said something profound as he laid out his ambition to send Americans to the moon. He said, *“We choose to go to the Moon and do other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard; because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one we intend to win.”*

2020 is indeed serving to “measure the best of our energies and skills” and we are all, at the City level and throughout our community, indeed doing hard things; taking steps and overcoming challenges that we must be willing to accept, cannot postpone, and that together, we can win.

I want to end by thanking City employees who show up to work every day to diligently and creatively provide valuable services and assistance to our residents. While much of the nation was in lock-down mode, much of the City’s workforce were indeed essential, and they all persevered and performed their duties with grace, diligence, collaboration, and even much-needed humor.

I thank the Alders for doing the hard work of governing and serving our community through their roles. Alders, I am calling on you to continue to join me in doing this hard work, of recognizing that we have difficult fiscal decisions to make in the months to come. I look forward to your continued creativity, your partnership, and your sharing of this vision of a more equitable, sustainable, prosperous Racine. I look forward to presenting the City budget to you in October and having a robust conversation with you between now and then.

And, most importantly, Racine residents, thank you for the honor and privilege of being your Mayor. I wake up every single day thinking of how to improve this City, my hometown.

Together, we will all rise to meet these once-in-a-generation challenges. Together, we will prioritize, we will adapt, and we will innovate.

Socially distance, wear a mask, and stay safe everyone.

Good night, and thank you.