

SPECIAL MEETING OF THE CITY COUNCIL**MAY 16, 2023**

The meeting was called to order by President Pro-Temp McGiverin at 6:36 PM

The Clerk called the roll. Absent members: 2 (Bartley, McGee) Present Members in person 10 (Anderson-Burgos, Givner, Jourdain, Maldonado Velez, McGiverin, Murphy-Romboletti, Rivera_I, Rivera_J, Tallman, Vacon). Present Members on Zoom: 1 (Puello)

McGiverin stated that he would be opening the meeting in place of President McGee who had a family commitment, and that the Council would then decide who would preside as president for the meeting. He then introduced Mayor Garcia, explaining that Mayor Garcia would be presenting the State of the City address and budget proposal for fiscal year 2024.

Mayor Garcia presented his State of the City address.

“Let me begin by thanking the members of the Holyoke City Council for welcoming me tonight. It’s been an honor and a privilege to work with you. Together, we’re showing how a smart local government can function.

Let me also thank all of our incredible city staff, at all levels and in every department. In a culture that too often rewards endless conflict and drama, you carry out the cherished task of keeping our government running smoothly—of ensuring that the people we serve have access to the services they rely on. You exemplify the ordinary, everyday heroism that keeps our democracy alive.

Thanks, also, to my wife Stefany. Her love, support, and patience give me the strength to do this job.

And lastly, I want to thank the people of Holyoke – not only for the trust they’ve placed in the elected officials in this chamber, but for their daily acts of love, kindness, and selflessness that make Holyoke such a special place to live. I’m thinking of the neighbors who rally around a community member when hardship strikes. The parents who teach their kids to be brave and kind. The citizens who, despite the passion of their beliefs, find it in their hearts to consider someone else’s perspective.

In my view, the role of government is to help give you all a fair shot. To ease your burdens. To make investments that will support your success and the success of generations to come.

For the past year, that’s exactly what those of us in this chamber have done.

When I addressed you last year, we were still just inching our way toward a new, post-pandemic reality. We’d pivoted from crisis to recovery. And the question we faced was exactly what kind of Holyoke we would become in the wake of the pandemic.

Would we become a Holyoke that understood how much we all need each other – a Holyoke where we’re willing to shoulder each other’s burdens and respond to crises with kindness and grace?

Would we become a Holyoke that took care of its fiscal house and planned for a better future?

Would we become a Holyoke that had a place for everyone, where everyone could enjoy a decent quality of life?

The work of the past year answered all of these questions, and the answer is a resounding “Yes.” Tonight, we can say with confidence that the state of our city is strong.

Our local economy keeps roaring back. After years of decline, the manufacturing sector is back and as vital as ever. Our mills, long silent, now hum with the sound of new industries. Cannabis cultivation and retail continues to be a major boon to the local economy. And the excise taxes and host fees this industry brings in remain a major source of revenue.

But if our economic past has taught us anything, it's that we can't place all our economic hopes in one industry. We need to be thinking about the long term – and about how we build upon our recent progress as we shape a prosperous, sustainable future.

The good news is we already have a wide range of industries right here in Holyoke – some of which are having a global impact. It's no exaggeration to say Holyoke is on the world stage. These industries are also growing our tax base, whether through tax payments or PILOT agreements my administration has been negotiating.

Our unique assets also make us an attractive spot for the industries of the future. Already, we're hearing from companies with an interest in the hydro-power capabilities of our dam and canals. Holyoke stands ready to lead the way into a green energy future.

To any business looking to set up shop here in Holyoke, our record is clear. You can thrive here. You can grow here.

Holyoke may be a small city. But ever since our founding, we've always punched above our weight. Our local economy has had an influence around the world. Our cultural events draw thousands from around the region and beyond to our community. Our politics always seem to be of interest to folks all across the state. Honestly, who can blame them? There's never a dull moment in Holyoke politics.

Today, in this new chapter in the city's history, we're making our mark once again. We're in a stronger position than we've been in in decades, which gives us the flexibility we need to improve critical services, invest in our capital, and plan for the future. And a major reason for that is what we've done to shore up our financial house and strengthen our internal controls.

Just last month, Standard & Poor's affirmed its A+ bond rating for Holyoke. According to its report, it did so because of our strong budgetary performance and our focus on cost-saving initiatives and long-term planning. I said it last year, and I'm happy to be able to say it again: The city of Holyoke is doing alright!

We should feel good about our progress. But the worst thing we can do is become complacent. If my time in office has had one unifying, overarching goal, it's been this: Strengthen our internal financial controls. That remains my top priority. The city of Holyoke faces many challenges, and our ability to address any of them relies on having our financial house in order. That's the foundation upon which we will build a stronger, more inclusive, more just city.

That's why, in this budget, I'm funding a new city position: a chief financial administrative officer – or CAFO for short. Creating this position is the logical next step in our efforts to clean up our fiscal house.

And it's consistent with recommendations made by the Massachusetts Division of Local Services, and have made this recommendation for the past fifteen years.

Here's why this position is important. As of today, we're still operating with an antiquated financial system. We haven't evolved with the times. That's not just my opinion. That's the objective analysis of rating agencies and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

The CAFO would help change that. The position would be filled by an expert in municipal finance whose main responsibility is to streamline our internal processes. The CAFO would make sure revenues are getting collected and appropriately posted, and present us with a more precise financial forecast, and manage a capital plan.

Our financial staff here at City Hall has done amazing work within a system that's not designed for their success. The progress we've made is a testament to their hard work. But Holyoke's financial future can't simply rely on the efforts of particular individuals. We need a better system.

Adopting the CAFO position will help us ensure continuity across administrations and across generations. It will help future mayors and future city councilors be better informed about city finances – and therefore better equipped to make smart decisions about our city's future.

So, let's invest in ourselves and our financial future. Let's work together to get this done.

The CAFO position is just part of the budget I'm presenting tonight. Just as I did last year, I'm presenting a budget that's in surplus. As of today, that surplus is a little over one million dollars. We're continuing to take a fiscally responsible approach, combining conservative budget controls and alternative revenue sources. And, once again, we're doing this without reducing the services our people rely on.

For those of you at home, let me tell you, in concrete terms, what this means for your life. Your trash and recycling will get picked up. Your local parks will be maintained. When it snows, your street will be plowed. We haven't figured out how to prevent the snowplow from pushing snow back into your driveway, though – we'll keep working on that. Emergency services will respond when you need it. It also means that for the first time in fifteen years, your local police department should be fully staffed.

Here's what else this budget means for folks at home: Your local government has a renewed ability to make capital investments to improve quality of life throughout the city. Road, sidewalk, and waterline repairs are underway.

And, thanks to the once-in-generation influx of revenue from ARPA funds, we are making long overdue investments in our government infrastructure. There's no reason that a 21st century local government should be hamstrung by an IT system from the 1990s. So, we've used ARPA funds to update our IT infrastructure and much more. And we're not finished. City Hall, the DPW building, the City Hall annex, and even these council chambers will all be getting much needed upgrades. When all is said and done, we'll have made 10 million dollars in capital upgrades – all at no additional cost to Holyoke taxpayers.

These investments are all signs of a healthy, self-respecting community. We're proud of this place. We believe in this place. We're willing to commit resources to improve this place.

But all of these investments, worthy as they are, will mean little for our future prosperity if we don't act to make one more crucial investment. It's time to build a new middle school.

Four years ago, our city had a passionate, sometimes contentious debate about whether to approve a debt-exclusion override to cover the cost of building two new middle schools. The question was put to the voters, and the voters made their preference known. While few doubted the importance of building new schools, folks had concerns about our city's ability to pay for this project. Some questioned whether Holyoke's taxpayers could afford an additional tax burden. The schools were voted down.

Regardless of how you voted on that question, we can all agree that Holyoke needs a new middle school. The need has only become more urgent since the voters last considered this question.

So, where does that leave us? It leaves us with an antiquated and inefficient middle school building not appropriately designed for our city's young people. It leaves our young people without a state-of-the-art facility to support a full and rich middle school experience. This, in turn, has ripple effects in every realm of our city's life. We can never reach our full potential until we finally guarantee a world-class education to all our students.

Fortunately, right now, we can do something about that. We have before us a plan that we can all embrace – one that transforms our school district without burdening taxpayers. The state has committed to paying 46 million dollars to build one new middle school in Holyoke. In the coming weeks, the City Council will consider whether to approve our city's share of the funding, or 40 million dollars stretched out over thirty years.

Let's be very clear about what this means. We can build a new middle school without a debt-exclusion override, which means we can build it without another voter referendum. We can build a new middle school within the parameters of our current budget.

But we do not have the luxury of kicking this can down the road any further. When the Massachusetts School Building Authority convenes next month, they will vote to approve their share of the funding. But they cannot proceed without action on our part. If the Council authorizes the funding, the MSBA can act, and then we can go out to bid to begin work on the project. This can all be underway by the fall. It's up to us.

This has been a long time coming. After years of debate and deliberation – of planning and preparing – we're ready to make a life-changing investment in our students. The path before is one of unity, collaboration, and redemption. And it's a path back toward the goal we're all actively working for and a goal that's well within reach: local control of our schools. I encourage every member of the Council to vote to authorize the funding. Let's get unanimous support.

Now, tonight, I've described just a few of the challenges we face. There is more work to do, whether it's implementing our solution for lifting the natural gas moratorium or addressing our Combined Sewer Overflow (CSO) long-term control plan. Together, I know we'll get these things done.

As we do this work – investing in our schools, strengthening our internal controls, investing in our capital – let's remember what an awesome privilege it is to work on behalf of this city we love. I had occasion to reflect on this just a few weeks ago, when I participated in the official dedication of our City Hall.

It's strange, when you think about it. Construction on this magnificent building – this cathedral of democracy – was completed more than 148 years ago. For reasons unknown, a formal dedication never took place. So, this year, on the 150th anniversary of Holyoke's incorporation as a city, we got together to finish the job.

Serving as your mayor, spending countless hours here in this building – it affords an interesting perspective on time, history, and human effort. I wonder if the laborers who painstakingly pieced this building together could have imagined that, all these years later, we would still stand in awe of what they gave us. That we would get together on a crisp spring day not only to dedicate what they built, but to sanctify the work that takes place within its walls.

That should teach us something about the work we do and what it means. Long after we're gone – long after the little dramas and conflicts of our day have faded from memory – our work will speak for us. Our legacy will be what we've built.

Let's all bear this in mind. There are robust debates still to be had. But let's never lose sight of the fact that we're partners in a common effort. Let's remember that we're all just passing through – that we serve here for a short while in the hope that our efforts might be fruitful for the thousands of Holyokers who will live after us. Let us strive always to let love motivate our work.

If we can do that, I have no doubt that 150 years from now, our work will still speak for us. Our love for this city will endure. And the people of Holyoke will feel blessed to call this city their home.

May God bless you all. May God bless the work we will do here. Thank you.”

FY2024 Budget Proposal

---> Laid on the table

Meeting adjourned at 6:58 PM

Brenna Murphy McLee