

Chairperson Weinstein, Chairperson Krueger, members of the Ways and Means and Finance Committees; other members of the Senate and Assembly: Thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding the Executive Budget on behalf of the residents of the City of Rochester.

Prior to the pandemic, our city was on the rise. Our economy was growing with new jobs and low unemployment. Our streets were safer with crime at historic lows. And, our families were stronger due to the availability of more affordable housing, pre-k education and job training.

However, the pandemic has created a myriad of revenue challenges and forced Rochester to take significant steps to do more with less, including:

- Freezing Discretionary Spending
- Furloughing Over 11% of our Workforce
- Denying Cost of Living Increases to Our Employees
- Deferring Capital Spending
- Passing a Current-Year Budget that is 4.7% Lower Than Last Year's.

Beyond making difficult decisions to protect our taxpayers, the City of Rochester has been innovative and leveraged its CARES Act funding to work with our community and government partners to support our residents and businesses in need:

- Distributing millions of meals to children and families;
- Dedicating \$10.2 million for direct rent assistance to benefit tenants and responsible landlords;
- Delivering \$2.4 million in Business Emergency Retention Grants to nearly 1,000 local businesses;
- Supporting Students with Laptops, Internet Access and Learning Labs as they learn remotely; and
- Mailing masks to every household.



The above accomplishments are just a sampling of the many efforts our city has undertaken to address the needs of our residents and protect our taxpayers during the pandemic.

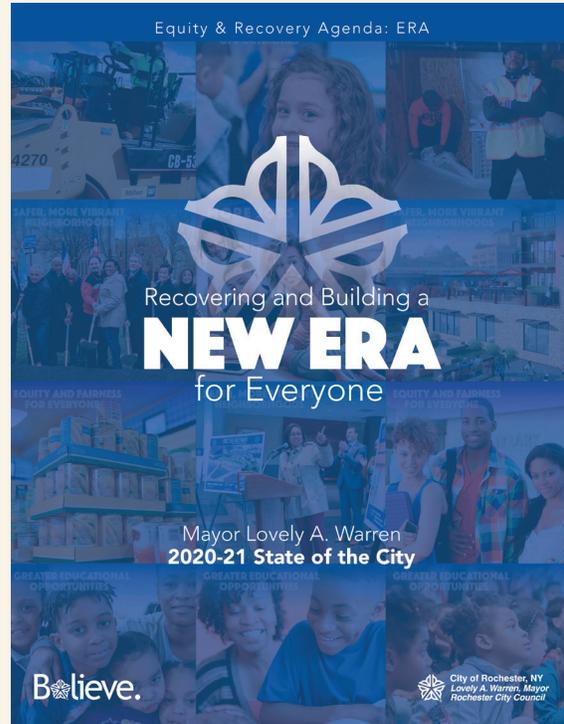
Despite this good work and significant progress, the City of Rochester is still wrestling with a \$31.4 million all-funds gap for our 2021-22 budget year. Simply put, we need more support from our state this coming year, not less. Reducing needed revenue to Rochester and other cities will completely hurt our ability to serve our residents. We need you to invest more so that we can adequately address the needs of our most vulnerable residents who are suffering the most during this pandemic due to historic inequities.



Lovely A. Warren

Mayor Lovely A. Warren
City of Rochester, NY

Studies have shown that people who made below \$60,000 before the pandemic will have a hard time recovering from this pandemic. A significant number of our residents fall below that income threshold. This includes our residents with disabilities, seniors and over half of our children. Even though we may be in the same storm, we are not in the same boat, and our residents need more support, not less. Our revenues have taken a brutal hit and we need your help. We've done what we can to mitigate the damage to our taxpayers, but our most vulnerable residents are suffering and we need to ensure that everyone participates in the economic recovery of our city. I recently unveiled a bold new Equity and Recovery Agenda. It's a series of proposals that address the immediate needs of our residents and also longstanding, systemic issues like housing, policing and economic disparities. The ERA agenda includes a housing trust fund, an emergency fund to assist families in crisis; much needed police reforms; as well as efforts to create more jobs; safer more vibrant neighborhoods and better educational opportunities for our children while also protecting our environment. It's essential that the State of New York provide the economic support directly to cities to help our residents.



The most immediate and effective way that I believe you can help the City of Rochester is to pass and push forward Majority Leader Crystal Peoples-Stokes' bill to legalize marijuana. Cities and neighborhoods most impacted and devastated by the criminalization and sale of illegal drugs should directly benefit from the taxation of marijuana. Many of our neighborhoods and most of our families were directly impacted by the mass incarceration and disinvestment in communities of color. Therefore, I urge you to consider proposing a tax structure for marijuana legalization that would mandate that a portion of the revenues generated by the State's THC-based tax and retail surcharge be given directly to cities like Rochester. Many other states have implemented this type of taxing structure. It is imperative that you make your support of marijuana's legalization contingent upon the neighborhoods and families most impacted by its criminalization receiving direct support through its cities. Majority Leader Crystal Peoples-Stokes' quest to create a dedicated revenue stream to help us lift our residents and our urban communities out of poverty is not only noble, it is just. I can assure you that if you direct those monies to the City of Rochester, we will immediately set up a Housing First and Equity fund to help our most vulnerable residents achieve their dreams.

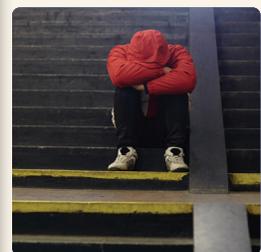
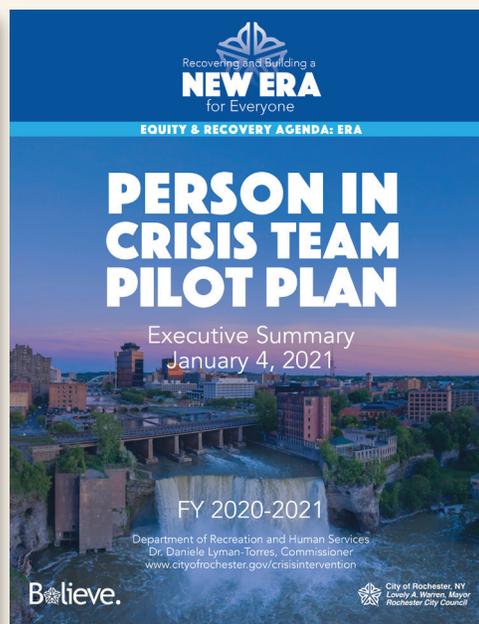
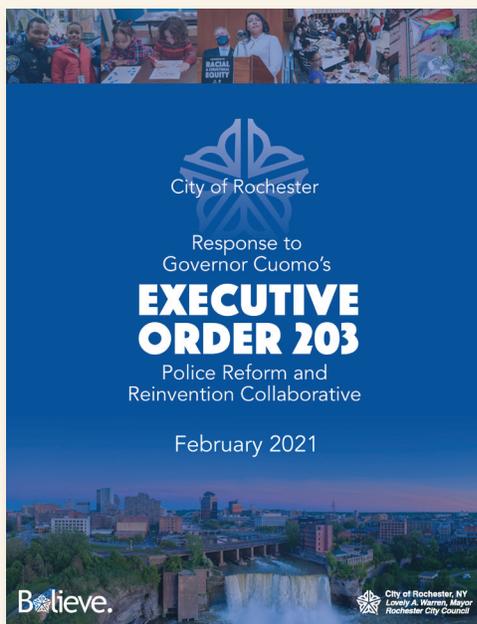


In addition, were thankful for Governor Cuomo’s charge via Executive Order 203 for communities to reimagine policing. Rochester has had its share of policing issues. Just recently, a young child, at the tender age of nine, was pepper sprayed and placed handcuffed in the back of a police car as she screamed for her father. As a mother, I was outraged as we all should be. Before that, we had another incident that involved our police that ended with Daniel Prude tragically losing his life. I will be the first to acknowledge we have a systematic problem in our policing system, not just in the United States, but in New York State, and in Rochester. The system no longer works for the people, especially those with mental health challenges and we have to change that.

We can’t just insist on training in implicit bias and racism. We can’t just change policies and procedures. We have to change the Civil Service hiring system. In response to the Governor’s charge, and in light of what body worn cameras have allowed for the world to see, we must change. I recently released the first draft of our Executive Order 203 plan for our community to respond to; and we will be sending that plan to the Governor once it’s updated and approved by City Council. We humbly request dollars in the State’s budget to allow the City of Rochester and communities around the State to expand and implement new mental health support to our communities that will alleviate the need for our officers to respond to mental health calls. We need a more humane response to residents in mental health crisis and many times, it doesn’t need to be a person with a gun and a badge.



While marijuana legalization and police reform are critical elements needed to help our residents, we must remember that all of our cities, including Rochester, require a state budget that provides the resources we need to deliver all of our essential services. We need to have firefighters, environmental services workers, 911 operators and the State’s Aid and Incentives for Municipalities, or AIM funding, has truly helped our city during these challenging times. But the formula doesn’t work.





It is a vital revenue source that we are most appreciative for and that is why we are asking, at the bare minimum, to remain whole, but an increase would help our city. We were elated to hear that the funding that was withheld in June is scheduled to be released by the end of March. This will truly be a blessing to our city as we counted on that funding. But, we also need you to restore the remaining 5% cut from the 2020 budget and eliminate the 2.5% cut from the Executive Budget, because this would provide Rochester with a much-needed \$6.6 million. Beyond restoring our current level of AIM funding, I must reiterate that Rochester continues to be short-changed on a per-resident basis when compared to Buffalo and Syracuse. We ask for parity in the AIM funding system to put us on par with our sister cities.

We understand that the State of New York is also struggling with a significant deficit. However, we have to maintain our commitment to the people that we govern and the best way we can do that is by ensuring that they have full access to adequate employment. For this reason, I'm requesting a full restoration of Rochester's infrastructure funding. While the Executive Budget does fund the CHIPS, PAVE-NY and BRIDGE-NY programs, it does not fund the Extreme Winter Recovery program. Restoration of this program would provide critical support and maintenance for our roads and bridges.

Beyond roads and bridges, we need to invest in the facilities that enrich the lives of our children and families. Libraries have become even more critical during the pandemic; providing educational resources, personal support and meaningful connections to broadband services for our residents. The proposed Executive Budget would decrease Library Construction Aid by roughly 60 percent. Our libraries rely on state support to properly assist our most vulnerable residents. Therefore, I ask you to fully restore Library Construction Aid.



ROC THE RIVERWAY

Believe IN THE POWER OF THE GENESSEE

One of our bright spots was our ability to keep people working during the pandemic thanks to the Roc the Riverway funding that we received pre-pandemic in partnership

with Governor Cuomo. These important projects have kept many Rochesterians working and have shown our city the potential of reconnecting to one of our greatest assets, the mighty Genesee River. This past year, we completed the Erie Harbor Promenade and the long-awaited Roc City Skate Park, as well as began construction on the West River Wall and Charles Carroll Park projects to bring our community back to its historic riverfront. We understand the fiscal challenges facing all of us. However, we ask you to remain committed to helping us ROC our Riverway.

I've outlined some major funding requests above and I also have an easy solution that would help you fund upstate cities without reaching into your coffers. Modernizing state law to create fairness can easily generate revenue to help upstate cities recover more quickly from the pandemic by addressing the Gross Receipts Tax loophole and requiring Energy Service Companies and mobile phone service providers to pay the GRT like you've done for New York City. These companies can no longer be allowed to ignore the law or be required to pay the GRT in New York City, and not in the rest of the state. Fixing this issue alone would provide at least \$6 million dollars to Rochester and would help cities all across the state.

I also support the proposal to require that all vacation rentals be subject to the same state and local sales taxes as traditional hotels, motels and bed and breakfast establishments; and vacation rental marketplace providers, such as VRBO and Airbnb, be required to collect such sales taxes. It is only right that an equitable playing field exists for all such businesses.





Additionally, the Governor’s proposal that would require all broadband service providers in New York State to offer income-eligible customers an Internet plan for no more than \$15/month should be supported. The pandemic has only served to highlight how critical it is for everyone to have reliable access to the Internet. Such access isn’t a luxury, it is a necessity for children to be able to learn and for families to be able to safely connect to other essential services like their doctor.

I appreciate all of your prior and continued support for the great City of Rochester.

I know that you all faced many hardships in 2020 and you lost some great colleagues, including my mentor and former Dean of Rochester’s State Delegation, Assemblyman

David Gantt. He served our City and this State with distinction for over 30 years. I miss him dearly, but he left this city in great hands with the new delegation that was sworn in this past January. We look forward to them working with all of you to ensure the needs of our City are met like David did for so many years. Thank you for the opportunity to talk to you about the challenges and opportunities we face. I am happy to take any questions.





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For more information
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