

## *39th Mayor of Providence Brett P. Smiley FY25 Budget Speech*

### **Welcome**

Madam Council President, honorable members of the City Council, State Senators and Representatives, Department Directors, community partners and fellow residents of our great City of Providence –

I am pleased to be here with you this evening to present my proposed budget for the upcoming fiscal year.

As I look around this room, I am reminded of what I love about Providence – the passion and dedication of so many people, from so many different sectors and walks of life – working together in a united commitment to seeing our city succeed. From the merchant associations supporting our unique small businesses, to the neighborhood groups building beautiful community spaces, to the city leaders and city staff who exemplify the very best in public service, it is the people in this room – and in living rooms and board rooms across our city – who have put us on a path to becoming the world-class city we all know Providence can be.

And for our part, our administration has worked every day to build a safer and stronger city that is more efficient, more effective and more responsive to the needs of our community.

We're building a City Hall that works for you. And over the past year, we've seen what can be accomplished when we engage with one another and use the needs of our residents as our guiding compass.

Together, our departments have developed a budget for you tonight that invests in the quality-of-life city services that matter most to our community while responsibly avoiding the difficult financial shortcomings that cities across the country are beginning to face as federal funding runs out.

### **A New Culture in City Hall**

It starts right here in this building. Since taking office, we have brought a culture of collaboration, communication and results to City Hall and to all departments.

We are so fortunate to have some of the brightest minds in Rhode Island working within these walls, giving everything they have to the city we love and seeing the tangible results of their hard work. That doesn't happen by accident. It happens when we go into our neighborhoods to recruit the best talent Providence has to offer - smart, dedicated people from communities too often underrepresented in City Hall. It happens when we set high standards for our boards and commissions to ensure they better reflect the diversity of our city. It happens when we professionalize and digitize our systems, bringing City Hall into the 21st century and freeing up staff to focus their time on impactful work that moves Providence forward. And it happens when we set measurable and achievable goals for every department and provide them with the support they need to achieve them.

Public service is never easy, but it is always noble. I truly see our leadership team as one of the greatest accomplishments of our first year. And to every city employee, thank you. I appreciate you and I value

everything you do. Can we have a round of applause for the amazing city staff that continues to raise the bar?

Providence has big challenges ahead, but when I look at everything we have accomplished together in the past year, I stand here tonight with absolute confidence that we are ready to take them on.

### **Using Government Funds Efficiently**

When we took office last year, Providence was in an unsustainable financial position. Though temporarily propped up by one-time federal pandemic relief funds, those funds were set to expire or run out. While many cities around the country used this funding to cover program gaps or pay for temporary services, we saw an opportunity to make long-term, tangible investments in vital community resources with the remaining dollars. The money would expire, but we set out to ensure that its impacts would be felt in Providence for generations to come.

I am proud to say that we have maximized every federal dollar available to us, and we have spent it all on high-need, high-impact programs and resources that will have long-term benefits for our residents.

We invested \$4 million in improvements at India Point Park, Merino Park, and the Woonasquatucket River area, beautiful public spaces enjoyed by hundreds of residents every day.

We invested \$3 million in emergency programs for our unhoused residents, providing safe shelter for folks across our city in the face of increasingly severe storms and cold weather.

And we responsibly weaned ourselves off those funds previously used to fill budget gaps by making difficult decisions to get to where we are today. We are not experiencing the dangerous fiscal cliff that communities across the country are experiencing as they develop their budgets this month. And I am proud to say that I have kept my promise and tonight I am submitting a balanced budget with no reliance on those one-time dollars and no increase to taxes for residents and businesses.

And finally, we made our largest commitment of ARPA funds -- \$29 million -- to address the most pressing issue facing our city today, the Housing Crisis. By further investing in our Affordable Housing Trust Fund, we took a vital step in our strategic plan to build more affordable housing in our city.

### **Housing & Strategic Growth Plan**

Indeed, we have been laser-focused on addressing our housing crisis from all angles.

Over the past year, we have invested in over 400 emergency shelter beds for our residents, providing a temporary solution for people and families in every corner of our city.

And thanks to the tireless work of the planning and development department, our housing and human services department and our partners on the City Council, we were the first community in Rhode Island to adopt new rules for how we build housing to respond to the current crisis. We restructured regulations and zoning to incentivize new housing development, and we streamlined City review processes and improved permitting transparency, increasing efficiency and expediting decision-making.

As a result, last year alone, we created 843 new housing units in Providence, with more than 500 additional units already underway this year.

Too often, housing is framed as an either/or approach, a false choice between affordable housing and housing at every other price point. I believe in an all-of-the-above approach. When we take abandoned properties, vacant lots, and former commercial properties and turn them into housing, everyone wins, whether it's a low-income resident looking for a safe place to call home or a young couple looking for a bit more space to grow their family.

New housing units at all price points are transformational for the people who live there, and for the businesses and community around them. It's an investment in our future, and it's an investment worth making.

As we develop our comprehensive strategic growth plan to foster more residential and business development in our city we spent countless hours of citywide meetings, neighborhood events and in-person and digital engagement with the people of Providence. Providence is poised for growth, and we're committed to ensuring it grows inclusively and sustainably, increasing our competitiveness with other cities and still nurturing the things that make our city unique.

The new Comprehensive Plan will help shape every aspect of our city's future, from how we spark new development to how we make Providence a national model in climate readiness.

Thank you to all the City Council members here tonight who engaged so thoroughly with this process and helped us develop a plan that will guide Providence to grow into a world-class city where people are excited to visit, work and call home.

## **PILOT**

Providence is fortunate to have assets that most cities can only dream of – a thriving food scene; innovative small businesses; incredible art and culture; and leading universities, hospitals, and nonprofits. As we look to grow over the next decade, we must do so in concert with all of these sectors, ensuring that all boats are lifted by our rising tide.

Last year, we reached a landmark agreement with our private colleges and universities to make a generational investment in our city. This new PILOT agreement more than doubles their contributions to our city and serves as a model for reimagining the relationship between cities and their higher education institutions. This agreement has been nationally recognized and when I speak with my counterparts in other cities, they often ask how they can do what we did here.

Brown, RISD, PC and Johnson & Wales are anchor institutions in our city. They create thousands of jobs for Providence residents, support hundreds of small businesses, and provide educational and community benefits throughout our neighborhoods. Our new agreement, which amounts to almost \$450 million in contributions from these institutions over the next two decades, is structured to build on the many areas in which we benefit one another. From investments in schools and green spaces, to support for critical infrastructure projects, to a new working group featuring higher education and community leaders focused on addressing neighborhood quality-of-life concerns, this PILOT agreement is a game-changer for our city and a framework for progress.

When it comes to our largest nonprofit landowners, our colleges and universities are one side of the coin – right now, some of our hospitals are on the other. Whereas our educational leaders came to the table with an open mind and a collaborative spirit, we look for the same from our partners at the hospitals.

To the Lifespan leadership team – it's time to come to the table with a meaningful contribution. I am confident that we can also reach a fair, equitable, and mutually beneficial agreement that ensures we grow together in the decades to come. Hospitals throughout the region have made meaningful long-term commitments to their host communities, you can to.

## **Public Safety**

Building a City Hall that works for you means putting your safety and security above all else. Our police officers and firefighters have difficult and dangerous jobs, and they need the right tools and resources to do them effectively.

Since taking office, we have worked to strengthen the relationships between police officers and the communities they serve, and we have focused their efforts on addressing violent crimes and quality-of-life crimes.

Under the leadership of Chief Oscar Perez, we have removed hundreds of illegal guns from our streets. We have stepped up enforcement of speeding violations, increased enforcement of noise pollution, and have confiscated over 200 ATVs, sending a loud and clear message that crowding our streets with these illegal vehicles will not be tolerated.

All of this work is only made possible by the dedicated officers who serve our city, and we are committed to continuing to build a police force that is representative of our community. It took nearly 160 years to put a woman on the command staff in our department. It is inexcusable that it took that long, but this is a significant milestone that I am incredibly proud of. I want to take a moment to commend her for her leadership, Major Alyssa DeAndrade and ask that you join me in recognizing her work.

Additionally, I am incredibly proud that we have graduated a new academy of diverse recruits, with another under way. Keeping Providence safe means continuing to fund police academies so that the department can get back to full force while also investing in every officer currently on the force. I'm proud to say that this budget and our recently negotiated agreement with the FOP does just that. Tonight, I'm calling on the City Council to approve that contract and this budget which again includes an additional academy for necessary staffing.

I also believe that not every call requires a response from an armed officer, and while we have focused our policing efforts on violence and quality-of-life, we have also increased our public health response and provided additional tools to address nonviolent emergencies including an increase to our successful go-team with Family Services of Rhode Island which pairs our police with qualified and trained social workers.

And in our fire department and under the leadership of Chief Derek Silva, we instituted a new pilot program through which EMS units are assigned bicycle details in and around Downtown. Having trained medical personnel on-the-ground and able to respond quickly to everything from opioid overdoses to

mental health emergencies has provided critical support for residents and saved lives. This year, we look forward to expanding this program to more neighborhoods across Providence, beginning with Broad Street.

The needs of our community and demands on our fire department have changed. We are experiencing an 11% increase in non-emergency calls and we're all aware of the mental health crises in our country. As a result, last year the fire department deployed a new unit called Mobile Health 1, a mental health and non-emergency medical response vehicle. This budget continues to support that dedicated team and also adequately staffs the Department with the people they need to serve our community.

From attending community events and meetings, to participating in neighborhood development initiatives, to a new cadet program that introduces Providence Public School students to public safety and EMS careers, we are building a new era of trust and transparency that will benefit our city for many years to come.

### **Quality Of Life**

Improving our quality of life is about more than enforcing our laws - it's about getting the little things right the first time, every time. From plowing roads, to picking up trash, to fixing sidewalks, we are building a City Hall that is both proactive and responsive – addressing issues before they arise and ensuring efficient and effective delivery of services to every resident and business.

One of the first things I did after taking office was launch a Community Satisfaction Survey, eliciting opinions from thousands of people across Providence about how City Hall can better meet their needs. Based on this feedback, we made a series of targeted investments in technology and infrastructure improvements that are yielding substantial results.

Through our Capital Improvement Plan, we allocated more than \$87 million to improve roads, sidewalks, parks and green spaces, the top complaints from businesses and residents. We implemented new staff training and installed new project management software to get work done faster and foster better communication between residents and City Hall. We are creating a new PVD311 system that will launch later this year, streamlining our ability to respond to requests of all types. And we provided \$150,000 in grants to community organizations to clean up litter and beautify streets across our city this spring.

I am also proud to announce tonight that this week our Department of Public Works will begin rolling out modernized parking meters throughout the city, making it easier for all those who live, work and visit Providence to park and shop at our local businesses.

At the same time, we have worked across departments to establish a strategy for addressing graffiti and, finally, budgeting dedicated staff to remove graffiti. This spring, we will have a citywide Graffiti clean-up to address tagging on both private and public property. And we've done all this while also creating new opportunities for intentional art across Providence. We are the Creative Capital. We have some of the best artists in the world. And we are committed to making sure they can showcase their work and beautify our city, without having to do so under the cover of night in places where it will be removed immediately.

### **Education**

There is no asset more important to Providence than our people, and that starts with our students. Five years ago, our school department was taken under state control to address significant and longstanding shortcomings in the education we provide to our young people.

When I ran for mayor, I pledged to oversee the transition back to local control, but I made clear that doing so without first seeing tangible improvements would not be acceptable.

Last year, I announced the formation of a new working group to oversee the return of our school district to local control - a working group made up of diverse and talented leaders from across our city. This group has been hard at work developing a process for a smooth and efficient transition. This summer, we will be launching a community engagement process to help guide us and ensure that every voice is reflected in the steps we take next.

But while we prepare for this transition, we're also moving forward on programs and partnerships that provide better educational opportunities for our students right now starting with our youngest learners.

We have supported 16 home-based childcare facilities with over \$400,000, which not only helps improve quality and increase enrollment but most importantly provides 133 children with better early learning facilities, setting them up for success in future years. Additionally, another 119 children will now be able to access outdoor space. Tonight, we have with us Ana Bencosme and Monami Carrasco, both of whom are Family Childcare Educators, and Jeannie Cola and Kayla Arruda from LISC, leading partners in the city's early learning infrastructure grant program. The work they do not only supports our families, but it sets these children up for success. And I'm excited to announce that we will be releasing nearly \$300,000 in another round of infrastructure grants to support family childcare providers next month. Ana, Monami, Jeannie and Kayla, can you stand so we can recognize the amazing work you do?

Last year we cut the ribbon on three modernized schools and this year we are constructing three more new schools. That is over \$240 million to rebuild crumbling school infrastructure, build new science labs, libraries, and other assets critical for a true 21st century education.

We have continued robust summer learning and employment opportunities while expanding our recreation options to include the first ever city led soccer league.

We remain absolutely committed to Pre-K and we are investing in facilities and centers to ensure that every single student has a seat who needs one.

Finally, I am proud to say that this year we are increasing our contribution directly to the Providence Public School district by over 3 million dollars. That is the largest increase in 7 years and absolutely deserves a round of applause.

## **Climate Readiness**

Perhaps the biggest challenge facing Providence over the next decade is climate change.

Every resident and business in this city knows all-too-well how destructive increasingly severe storms and flash floods can be, and unfortunately these events are becoming a more and more common occurrence. Rain is the new snow, but unlike snow, it is not constrained to one season. We must be ready to address the impacts of severe rain at any moment, and that means proactively investing in climate readiness infrastructure that protects our communities.

Over the past year, that is exactly what we have done.

We've invested \$3 million in long-overdue improvements to the Providence Hurricane Barrier.

At the same time, we're upgrading our stormwater and sewer infrastructure to be able to handle the increasing volume of rainwater that we're seeing now and into the future. Our infrastructure simply was not built to handle 21st century storms, and it's time to bring it all up to date. Storm response is a cross-departmental effort, and I want to recognize the Department of Public Works and the Providence Emergency Management Agency who have been at-the-ready 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to respond to everything that comes our way. Their leadership has protected property and saved lives, and Providence is lucky to have them on our team.

While we move forward with mitigation tactics that address the impacts of climate change we're already feeling, we are also taking steps to decrease our carbon footprint with substantial policy developed by the City Council and our Sustainability department. In the last several months I was proud to sign three pieces of legislation that will decrease our carbon footprint, lead by example, create healthier neighborhoods and put our capital city at the heart of America's clean energy revolution. Climate change is a global problem with local impacts, and Providence is on the frontlines. But the challenge of climate change is also an opportunity to embrace a new era of clean energy and the jobs that come with it, and we're ready to lead the nation.

We have some folks here with us tonight from Climate Jobs RI who will be doing the work to make our city a better place— can you all stand?

### **City On The Rise**

I used to say that Providence is one of the country's best kept secrets.

Well, the secret is out.

A study released earlier this year shows that Rhode Island was the fifth ranked state in the country for attracting new residents in 2023, and a recent report from Forbes included Providence in the top 25 U.S. cities with the best quality of life. In the past year, national publications have called us both "The Best Up-And-Coming City" and "America's Comeback City."

When I speak with mayors around the country, they often ask me about why more and more people are choosing Providence. And I tell them about our work in City Hall, but I also tell them about the great restaurants, the world-class theaters, the live music, the public parks, and the vibrant downtown. I tell them about our welcoming and diverse neighborhoods. I tell them that Providence is more than a home – it's an identity. And it's a badge that we wear proudly wherever we go.

### **Closing**

There are some tough challenges ahead. From continuing to address the housing crisis, to better providing for our students, to supporting the small businesses harmed by the ongoing Washington Bridge construction, we're facing big issues with no simple solutions. But that's exactly where our team thrives.

This budget is about regaining a strong financial position and setting us up for success not just in the next year, but in the next decade. It's about using the funds we have to more efficiently and effectively serve our community. By continuing to bring in new businesses and residents, we will grow our tax base without increasing taxes, and we will continue to provide the highest level of city services.

Over the past year, we have shown that we can do big things AND get the small things right.

We have built a City Hall that works for you.

Thank you.