



Andy Schor, Mayor

2021 State of the City Address

Mayor Andy Schor

February 3, 2021

Good evening and thank you for joining me for Lansing's first virtual State of the City.

Before I begin tonight, I want to recognize the passing of Olivia Letts earlier this week. The name Olivia Letts is synonymous with excellence, kindness, and courage. She was a trailblazer who became the first Black teacher in the Lansing Public Schools. Olivia and her husband, the late Dick Letts, formed a power couple for social justice and community activism. Her passing is deeply saddening and I am grateful to have known such a woman of grace. I can honestly say that Lansing is a better place today because of her.

For the last 11 months we have had our worlds completely altered. It has been a challenging time here in Lansing and across the world. I know we are all anxiously awaiting the time when we can once again gather in person. As more vaccinations are administered every day throughout our community, that time is getting closer.

Over the past year we have lost many friends and neighbors to COVID-19. And like so many of you, I have had friends and loved ones who have fallen victim to this terrible virus. It has been a brutal time for so many families. Please keep those we have lost in your thoughts and memories.

Let me start by thanking some of the people who support both me and the city and keep me going when the world is throwing curveballs. First, I want to recognize and thank my family. The last year has been as challenging for us as it has for many other families across our city. Like so many others, we work from home as much as possible and our kids are doing at-home learning through the Lansing School District. I am grateful for the support of my wife, Erin, and my children, Ryan and Hannah. I cannot do this job without you.

I would also like to thank my City Council partners. A truly effective city government needs a strong partnership between the Mayor and City Council. I am thankful for the relationships my administration has built with Council President Peter Spadafore, Vice President Adam Hussain, and all members as we continue to work together to get the job done for our residents.

I certainly cannot do any of this work without our wonderful employees at the City of Lansing. We have a strong team and I am grateful for the hard work they do every day. Even in the midst of a pandemic our police, firefighters, and EMS respond to calls; our code and premise enforcement

officers help those living and investing in Lansing; our human relations and financial empowerment staff assist those in need, our public service staff fill potholes and fix sidewalks, and our parks employees ensure that our residents have socially distant recreation opportunities. These are just a few examples of the great work being done by City of Lansing staff and I truly appreciate our employees for their dedication to Lansing.

Finally, thank you to the residents of the City of Lansing. Last March, when the coronavirus reached the city, we were all anxious about what this new virus was going to mean to us in our daily lives. Since then, we have learned a lot about how to protect ourselves and our families. Not only by wearing masks and social distancing, but by taking care of neighbors when they needed it most, supporting local businesses by getting carry out and shopping local, and participating in virtual community conversations and events. We have certainly gone through a lot over the last year and we have made so many adjustments to keep each other safe. My deepest thanks to all of you for your part in protecting each other.

As Governor Whitmer said last week, the State of our State is resilient. I agree with her. The State of the City of Lansing is also resilient, and we will continue to face challenges head-on.

COVID-19

No one expects a pandemic, but last March we were faced with the same questions as the rest of the country: how to provide City services while protecting our employees and residents.

Fortunately, it is not something I had to take on alone. I knew it was important to pull together the absolute best talent to help us navigate this extraordinary challenge. Our emergency management team in the Lansing Fire Department, along with Linda Vail, the Ingham County Health Officer, contributed their expert advice and counsel as we guided the City of Lansing through this pandemic.

My focus now is on mass vaccinations and ensuring that everyone can get the vaccine and are able to be immune from this terrible virus. I firmly believe that Linda Vail is the best health professional in the country, and we are lucky to have her expertise right here in Lansing.

(LINDA VAIL VIDEO)

Our partnerships to fight COVID were not just local. Communities across the state and the world are dealing with the same challenges. The support of Congress and our state Legislature is more critical than ever. State Representatives Sarah Anthony, Kara Hope, and Angela Witwer along with State Senator Curtis Hertel, Jr. have been fierce advocates for additional funding for Lansing, and I thank them for their continued support. I also greatly appreciate the advocacy of our Congresswoman Elissa Slotkin and our US Senators, Debbie Stabenow and Gary Peters, for pushing Congress to help cities that have taken the brunt of the economic damage. We must be able to provide services for our residents and our federal representatives recognize that. I implore our federal officials to pass a comprehensive plan to provide stimulus funds for cities as soon as possible in order to stave off cuts to services that residents expect. And I also have to thank Governor Gretchen Whitmer. She has had

to make some tough decisions that were not always popular, but I know she is taking the necessary actions to keep Michiganders safe and healthy.

RACIAL JUSTICE AND EQUITY

COVID-19 is just one of the critical challenges that Lansing and so many communities across the nation had to face in the past year. Last summer, bias and racial injustice became front and center with the horrific killing of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis. This launched a renewed and important push for racial justice and equity. We must face the harsh reality of inequality and injustice for Black and Brown members of our communities. These conversations can be uncomfortable and difficult, but they are necessary.

Lansing is a proudly diverse city. We remain focused on ensuring everyone is able to access city resources and that all people are treated with the same level of respect and dignity regardless of the color of their skin or how they identify. We continue to evaluate our processes and policies both internally and externally. Last summer, after some evaluation, we took action that created immediate change. I worked with Police Chief Daryl Green to reform our traffic stop policies for minor offenses, and to eliminate “no knock” searches. Thank you, Chief Green, for your leadership in making these important changes.

We were also one of only six communities chosen to participate in the national Cities Addressing Fines and Fees Equitably project. Our Financial Empowerment team worked with 54-A District Court and with those facing past-due fines from driving on a suspended license. Significant fees owed to the court were waived if the person met with a financial counselor at Cristo Rey Community Center’s Financial Empowerment Center. It is our hope to use what we learn to further assess the impact and equity of other fines and fees, and the impacts on our community members.

I would like to take a moment to recognize the judges and staff of 54-A District Court. Throughout the pandemic, our courts continued to operate and be innovative in order to ensure that justice could be administered. I am grateful to Chief Judge Louise Alderson and 54-A Court Administrator Anethia Brewer, a valued and important member of my cabinet, for their tireless work these past 10 months.

As a leader, it is my job to pull together experts and listen to their recommendations. That is why I brought in Teresa Bingman, an expert on racial justice, to lead our racial justice and equity effort. She is working closely with me, Chief Green, Director Kim Coleman, Director Linda Sanchez-Gazella, and Lansing’s own Willard Walker. We have formed the Mayor’s Racial Justice and Equity Alliance and engaged dozens of community leaders throughout the region.

Together, we are creating the Lansing Racial Justice and Equity Plan. The Alliance also worked with me to craft and issue an Executive Directive to ensure City staff receive important training to prevent implicit bias at the City and to utilize the knowledge of national efforts like the Government Alliance on Race and Equity.

The Mayor’s Racial Justice and Equity Alliance will host a community update later this month. Look for more details to be announced soon about how to participate in that meeting.

(MRJEA VIDEO)

Thank you to Teresa and everyone who has worked so hard on making these important recommendations for our city. Thank you also to Lansing's first Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Officer, Guadalupe Ayala. I appointed Guadalupe to this new position last year. She is a veteran City employee working in our Human Relations and Community Services Department and has deep ties to our community. She has hit the ground running, holding trainings for our cabinet and departments and has already made a tremendous impact on our city.

CONNECTING

One of the many lessons that we learned in 2020, was the importance of human connection. Many of us went from seeing our colleagues at the office and dropping our kids off at school to navigating remote work and virtual school. Those who continued working in person had to adjust by practicing social distancing and following mask requirements. All of these changes to our daily social lives made it imperative to find ways to safely connect with our friends, family, and neighbors to keep some form of normalcy.

That is why it was critical for the City of Lansing to act as a connector: a connector of neighbors, services, organizations, and resources.

When we think back to the year 2020, I want us to remember not only the challenges we faced but how we all came together to support one another. The City of Lansing worked with its partners to provide services and resources during unprecedented circumstances.

While City Hall has been closed to the public since mid-March of last year, our employees have still been hard at work, both in person and remotely, to ensure services are delivered to our residents.

We have offered unique recreation opportunities and ways to connect our community during these disconnected times with drive-thru events such as the Mayor's Senior Fair, Trick-or-Treating on Halloween, and Holiday Lights at Frances Park. We have also continued to provide the necessary day-to-day services expected by our residents like plowing the streets and picking up trash while still ensuring our employees are protected. We also made sure that every resident could participate in the important November election, including providing absentee ballots to all that wanted them and adding drop boxes and other resources for our residents. Thanks, and congratulations to City Clerk Chris Swope and his staff for this incredibly successful effort.

COVID-19 made us rethink how we work, but it is also been an opportunity to strengthen our partnerships.

We re-opened the Gier Community Center to house those who were homeless and partnered with the City of East Lansing to provide dollars for the unsheltered, in addition to the annual dollars that Lansing allocates.

We partnered with the Lansing School District to turn the Foster Community Center into a Learning Lab, providing safe classroom space for Lansing students whose parents had to return to work in person. There have not been any COVID-19 cases in the lab thanks to parents keeping kids home if they did not feel well, the kids wearing their masks and following protocols, and our staff keeping the kids safe and the building properly sanitized.

Last summer, I also worked with several local and regional partners to create the Mayor's Community Response Cabinet. Through this group of nonprofit organizations, businesses, education partners, and community leaders, we worked together to combine resources and efforts. This was a time for all of us to come together to efficiently manage this crisis for the entire Greater Lansing region.

The Community Response Cabinet created the One Lansing Fund to help our neighbors who were struggling to pay their rent or mortgage and to feed themselves and their families and with so many other day-to-day needs. I am grateful to the Capital Area United Way, the Community Foundation, the Greater Lansing Food Bank, the Lansing School District, LEAP, and other partners for their efforts to help those in need.

But 2020 was not just about crisis. We also saw investment and economic growth in Lansing amidst the pandemic. We were able to open hundreds of new housing units Downtown, along the Michigan Avenue Corridor and in South Lansing. The beautiful Capital City Market officially opened at the corner of Michigan and Larch, providing fresh food to an area that was previously underserved for affordable food access. The new Courtyard by Marriott will open on the same block later this month, bringing us our first hotel in Downtown Lansing in more than 30 years. Construction continued on important projects across the city, and I am grateful for all of those investing in Lansing.

While many development projects continued, our small businesses felt the brunt of the pandemic. Many were forced to close for weeks or months at a time and have struggled to keep their doors open. Since the pandemic, my administration has been deliberate in efforts to keep our small businesses open.

I worked with the Lansing Chamber of Commerce, serving on the taskforce to develop and introduce the Relaunch Greater Lansing guidebook to help our businesses safely navigate COVID-19.

I also worked closely with the Lansing Economic Area Partnership, under the leadership of Bob Trezise, to help get money to struggling Lansing businesses. In total, LEAP was able to provide more than \$6.5 million dollars in grants and loans to businesses in the region and I am proud that more than \$2.5 million of those dollars went to small businesses located right here in our city.

The City of Lansing and the Lansing Economic Development Corporation partnered to offer an additional \$600,000 specifically for struggling small businesses in Lansing. These grants were successful in keeping the doors open at small businesses all over the City. LEDC Chair Calvin Jones and I met with many of the owners, who expressed that this allowed them to keep from closing their doors and helped pay their employees. Hearing their stories and knowing that we made a positive impact is exactly why I will continue to prioritize additional resources to keep small businesses open.

Tonight, I am proud to announce that we are launching the Lansing CARES program that will provide additional assistance to Lansing businesses and residents in need. The City of Lansing will use nearly \$1.5 million through our federal Community Development Block Grant funds in several ways.

First, we will provide \$600,000 towards emergency financial assistance and disaster planning training to small businesses in danger of going out of business due to COVID-19. These forgivable loans of between \$5,000 and \$50,000 will be issued to small businesses by the LEDC with the help of LEAP staff as quickly as possible.

We will also work with Michigan Women Forward to provide \$100,000 in emergency financial assistance and disaster planning training to City of Lansing microenterprises in danger of going out of business due to COVID-19.

Finally, we will add \$780,000 to the current funding we provide to prevent homeless. This will include rent and mortgage payments for up to three months to Lansing residents and will be done together with Lansing's own Capital Area Housing Partnership.

Our Office of Financial Empowerment has also stepped up to provide additional resources to Lansing residents to help in these uncertain economic times. They created a new section on the City's Website called "Managing Your Finances During COVID-19", which is a compilation of financial tips, resources, and information on basic needs like: food, shelter, transportation, and utilities. Director Amber Paxton and the OFE team hosted a live weekly web series on Facebook to discuss finances and answer questions. And OFE received an \$80,000 grant from the national Cities for Financial Empowerment Fund to add an additional financial counselor for a year in response to the financial burden many of our residents are facing due to the pandemic.

Through the What Works Cities: Economic Mobility Initiative, we worked with several national organizations to advance economic mobility for our residents in Lansing. They helped make data-driven decisions including the implementation of a pilot program to incent current Lansing Promise Scholars to achieve finance related goals. We also created a grade-by-grade action plan for families to help them with the financial and educational aspects of their children's lives which can be found on the BOLD Lansing website.

Now, more than ever, we have learned how important it is to find ways to better connect residents to their local government. This year, we will make City Hall even more accessible remotely in a number of ways.

I am happy to announce that, for the first time, our Department of Treasury will be accepting e-file for individual income tax returns. Since I took office, we have heard many people ask for this as an easier way to file taxes, and to reduce the need for paper. We are working toward having this available on the website by spring of this year. Thank you to our City Treasurer, Desiree Kirkland, for making this a reality.

We are also in the process of completely transforming the City's website to make it easier for residents, visitors, and business owners alike to navigate and find what they need. Thank you to everyone who provided feedback throughout the website development process. This brand new, modern website will launch later this year.

From my first day in office, I made a commitment to constituent services. Today, I am taking that commitment one step further. I am proud to announce the City of Lansing's 3-1-1 project: One Call to City Hall.

This will be a one-stop shop for questions regarding any non-emergency City service. Later this year, citizens will be able to reach the City of Lansing by simply calling "3-1-1". "One Call to City Hall" is not a call center, it is an answering center, staffed by real people, right here in Lansing who will be equipped to handle almost any problem, question, or complaint that residents may have. We will provide better customer service for residents by addressing their concerns quickly and efficiently. Grand Rapids and Kalamazoo have already implemented 3-1-1 systems. By leveraging partnerships with them we will save thousands of dollars, and hundreds of staff hours, by using resources that these two cities have offered to share to speed up our roll out and ease implementation.

WRAPPING UP

If you had asked me three years ago where we would be in early 2021, I never would have guessed that we would be taking on these crises. Certainly, no one predicted a pandemic, or the economic challenges we would face as a result. But I know we are all ready to move forward and focus on what is next for this wonderful community. I started this speech by agreeing with Governor Whitmer that we are resilient. Lansing has been tested and we are coming out stronger because of it. I am proud of our team, our partners, our residents and the work we have done the last three years, and I look forward to what is next in 2021 and beyond.