



## Office of Mayor Miro Weinberger

### MEMORANDUM

To: City Council  
From: Mayor Miro Weinberger  
Date: April 3, 2024  
Re: The State of the City is Reunited

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Good evening everyone, welcome to City Hall, and Happy Ramadan to Muslims across Burlington, Vermont, and the world.

Congratulations to our re-elected City Councilors, Mark Barlow and Joan Shannon and welcome to our newly elected City Councilors, Hannah King, Tim Doherty, and Melo Grant. I'm happy to welcome Mrs. Marcelle Leahy, representing the Leahy family. Senator, we are all missing your company tonight but I have been assured that you are watching live and we are pleased to have you here remotely with the help of our partners at Town Meeting TV.

I am also excited and honored to welcome, tonight, our new Congresswoman Becca Balint, and my old friend and now Senator, Peter Welch. It is because of your leadership and tenacity in Washington that Vermont and Burlington are able to always punch above our weight.

I am always happy to welcome back to Contois Mayor Peter Clavelle who served an incredible 15 years in this role, and his wife, Betsy Ferries. Peter and Betsy, thank you for your advice, your support, and for the friendship you have given our family for many years now.

I want to thank Kyle Clark, the founder and CEO of Beta Technologies, and his wife Katie for joining us tonight. Kyle, your vision and progress towards making electric airplanes a reality are truly remarkable. I am so excited and proud that you believe in this community, and that you will soon be manufacturing your planes at the Burlington International Airport.

I can't recognize everyone in the room, but I am grateful that you all joined us tonight, and, moreover, I am grateful for your partnership in making Burlington the great city it is. It is a great privilege to serve with the outstanding group of Department Directors who are sitting behind me, and with the talented teams they lead. I would like to ask you all to stand so you we can recognize you for your sacrifice and service.

I am fortunate to have three generations of Weinbergers all here with us tonight, my incredibly supportive parents Ethel and Michael who have made the trip up from Hartland, my wondrous daughters, Li Lin and Ada, and my remarkable wife, Stacy who has done so much to make it possible for me to serve in this role I love, while also contributing so much to the community herself leading the King Street Center Head Start program. Amazingly, this is the 12<sup>th</sup> time I have given the State the City address. While these eleven years have passed, in some ways, very quickly, they will surely go down as one of the most momentous and tumultuous periods in American history.

Here in Burlington, we have faced crises since the day I took office.

First, we had to address an urgent liquidity crisis that threatened the City's ability to sustain basic services, followed then by the challenge of actually completing the sale of Burlington Telecom that was necessary to permanently stabilize our municipal finances. We had the largest construction project in the city's history go dark in 2018, and then stay that way for four years.

When I gave this speech remotely three years ago, two weeks after shutting down our bars and restaurants, I declared that the State of the City was a state of emergency. That summer of 2020, the city held its breath through 34 days of street protests and encampments in Battery Park, and that fall, on the second day of the new academic year, we had to permanently close our only high school.

And throughout the last 11 years, we have been buffeted by seismic national and international events.

Three days before being sworn in as Mayor, I stood in a receiving line at the airport to welcome President Barack Obama as he disembarked Air Force One. Four years later, we greeted candidate Donald Trump very differently, by erecting barriers on Main Street to interdict the violent clashes that often-marked Trump rallies.

At the end of my first year in office, 26 elementary school students and educators were massacred in Newtown, Connecticut. Since then, annual gun deaths in US have risen 39%, and our country's shameful list of mass tragedies has gotten far longer. As I was writing this speech – the latest school shooting in Nashville took 6 innocent lives and became, already, the 13<sup>th</sup> school shooting of 2023.

Burlingtonians celebrated on the back steps of City Hall when the Supreme Court declared marriage equality to be the law of the land, then rallied in the park after that same court struck down *Roe v. Wade*, eliminating a fundamental right for the first time in the country's history.

From our living rooms and workplaces, we watched the withdrawal of troops from Iraq and Afghanistan, an insurrection in our own nation's capital, and two presidential impeachments. Tomorrow, we will witness the arraignment of a former President for the first time.

We experienced the worst pandemic in 100 years, and a racial justice reckoning 400 years in the making.

And right now, the country is enduring the highest inflation in 40 years, and the first major war in Europe in over 70 years.

Yet, through all of this, we have forged steady, enduring progress here in Burlington. Our city in 2023 is in many ways a better place than it was in 2012.

In 2012, we were teetering on a financial cliff, millions of dollars in the red. Today, we are once again a AA city, with millions of dollars in reserve, and that financial strength gave us the ability to deploy resources decisively to fight the pandemic and now lead the economic recovery.

In 2012, our housing market was badly broken having only produced about 500 homes over the prior decade. Now, after many ordinance reforms and major focus, we are starting to make good on the promise that housing is a human right by building many more homes. We built almost 1300 homes in my first ten years in office, and are on track to meet our goal of doing that again in just five years, with nearly 800 homes under construction in the city right now.

In 2012, Burlington had fewer than 25 solar installations. Today, we have 385 solar arrays generating well over 9 megawatts of deployed PV, the most per capita of any city east of the Mississippi. Since introducing our Green Stimulus Incentives in 2020, residential installations of cold climate heat pumps have increased 20-fold. We are continuing and expanding these incentives, while investing millions into grid upgrades and other infrastructure projects that will help us “electrify everything” - all while keeping electric rates low – even as utilities across New England recently saw double-digit hikes. In 2012, major elements of our public infrastructure were in disrepair.

Since then, we have used our renewed financial strength to complete over \$100 million of investments in our essential public infrastructure.

And just three weeks ago the community broke ground one of our most important pieces of public infrastructure – a nearly \$200 million 21<sup>st</sup> century high school.

We have funding commitments and engineered plans in place for this investment and renewal to continue for years to come. Within the next year, we will break ground on a \$30 million effort to turn Main Street into a Great Street and great public space, without increasing property tax rates, through the use of our Downtown TIF District. And over the next few years, we will invest even more TIF funds and federal dollars to rebuild all of Bank Street and Cherry Street, and to finally reconnect Pine and St. Paul Streets for the first time since they were severed during Urban Renewal.

No facet of our public infrastructure has seen greater transformation than our parks. When I took office in April 2012, parts of the Bike Path were still closed from the spring 2011 flooding, and the general state of our parks had prompted voters to lead an effort to

create a new dedicated tax for maintaining the parks. We got the path repaired in time to host the Vermont City Marathon on its traditional route that Memorial Day, and then we kept working on it, for years, until just last summer we finished the 8 mile, \$16 million rebuilding and enhancement of the entire path – the largest parks project in the city’s history.

We made major investments in Waterfront Park and the Urban Reserve, created two new lakeside parks, and opened the wonders of Rock Point to the public forever through a conservation easement with the Episcopal Church.

As much as I love picking out playground equipment with the expert advice of Ada and Li Lin, I will spare you the details of our 6 playground overhauls -- other than to very happily report that we are well into construction of the state’s only fully universal and accessible playground. I want to recognize community member, Annie Bourdon and her son, Otis. I am grateful to Annie and dozens of other neighbors who have been championing the Oakledge for All playground for years and I can’t wait to enjoy the park with you this summer. In 2012, the city was pock-marked with stuck and stalled projects.

The former coal-fired Moran Plant sat crumbling amidst the weeds and industrial debris of the northern waterfront, bus riders were still using a makeshift transit center from the 1980s, and the Champlain Parkway right of way was laying fallow. Today, the revived and remediated Moran FRAME is a monument of Burlington’s innovative spirit on the now vibrant northern waterfront, 750,000 riders a year enjoy our 21<sup>st</sup> century transit center, and the Champlain Parkway is under construction again after a 34-year hiatus.

**Of all the City's stories of recovery and investment over the past 11 years, none has been more dramatic than the Burlington International Airport.**

In 2012, BTV was one of just two junk-bond rated airports in the U.S. and was courting disaster with less than one month's cash on hand. We now have nearly two year's cash in reserve, and a solid, stable rating from Moody’s. BTV is now one of the busiest airports in New England, second only to Boston's Logan Airport, and is an economic engine for our region.

None of this success, or prior decades of growth, would have been possible without the critical support of you, Senator Leahy. You have always understood what a critical link the airport is between Vermont and the world, and you worked tirelessly throughout your 48 years in office to strengthen that link.

You supported the Air National Guard -- a key partner to the airport's success -- and you played a leadership role in securing the astonishing nearly \$145 million we plan to invest at the airport over the next five years, including the \$34 million Congressionally Directed Spending grant that you secured in the FY23 Appropriations bill in December - just before you and Marcelle came home to Vermont.

Your support for Beta set the stage for the company to sign an 80-year lease with this City, promising significant future economic growth and technical innovation for years to come.

**To recognize your commitment to the airport, your lifetime of service to the people of Vermont, and your special relationship to Burlington -- your home once again -- we are proud to say -- I am happy to announce that the City of Burlington will rename the airport the Patrick Leahy Burlington International Airport.**

We are so proud of Senator Leahy, in part, because over 48 years of exemplary service he took Vermont's values not only to our nation's capital, but to the world stage.

For over a year now, Ukraine has repulsed Russia's full-scale invasion of the country. All free people owe Ukrainians a solemn debt for their courageous and inspiring stand against 21<sup>st</sup> century authoritarianism.

The world is so much safer today – we are so much safer here in Burlington – with President Putin blocked and on the defensive, than the world we would have been living in if he had succeeded at claiming Ukraine by force quickly and easily.

We are standing with the Ukrainians in aid and in spirit, and must continue to do so resolutely.

We have two young men in our community, Adam Roof and Colin Hilliard, who have understood this and responded to the war by traveling twice, once to Poland and once to Ukraine, to deliver aid in country and to outfit shelters for fleeing refugees. Their continued efforts have brought over \$130,000 of humanitarian aid deep into the country and toward the eastern frontlines.

The people of Ukraine deserve and are going to need our sustained attention and help through the remainder of this terrible war and through the long years of rebuilding that they face in the wake of Russia's systematic bombing of civilian infrastructure.

To that end, I am commissioning Adam and Colin to leverage their experiences of the past year to create a new sister city relationship with a Ukrainian city by this time next year. In addition to the typical goal of cultural exchange, a goal of this new effort will be for Burlington to be a partner to our Ukrainian counterpart in the rebuilding effort, by providing both municipal technical expertise and continued humanitarian aid.

I knew, of course, when I stood up here for the first time in 2012 that we faced big challenges and a lot of hard work. The financial crisis and lack of progress on major public projects had drawn me to this job and I was certain that we could do much better.

What I didn't fully realize was that our tests would include having to grapple with fundamental principles and questions about how we live and thrive together in community.

At this table we have had to answer big questions including:

How do we keep our community safe and what is the role of the police in achieving that?

How do we define racial justice and racial equity and how do we pursue it in our time and place?

What is our local role in confronting the existential global threat of climate change?

And even, what role do we have in protecting, strengthening and evolving our democracy itself?

After 11 years of intense, passionate debate in this room, and 11 Town Meeting Days plus at least four more special elections where the community made decisions on dozens of charter changes and millions of dollars of infrastructure investments, I deeply understand the old truism that in a free society these defining questions are never fully settled, and that each generation needs to answer them for themselves.

This has been particularly true over the last three years as we experienced unrest on our streets, and at times -- gridlock at this table.

**With the decisive 2023 Town Meeting Day behind us, the State of the City is reunited, and stronger for having weathered so much. The priorities of the community are clear, and we are moving forward.**

Let's look at those March election results:

#### **Public Safety**

Voters – somewhat narrowly – voted down an effort to remove significant authority from us, the City's local elected officials. Together, we here at this table need to make good on that vote of confidence and deliver progress promptly its wake.

On ballot question #7, nearly two-thirds of the city made it clear that they greatly value public safety, and they are expecting city government to restore it now.

When we meet again in two weeks, I will be asking for the Council's approval on outstanding elements of the most recent public safety plan I announced in January: creating a Deferred Retirement Option Plan to retain senior officers through the Police Department's rebuilding period; creating an assistant director at the BPD to oversee and coordinate our new alternative crisis response resources; and making a clear Council statement of support for partner law enforcement agencies that help us increase our downtown public safety presence until the BPD is fully staffed once again. It's also time to resolve the unfinished debate over police oversight.

Since 2016, we have steadily expanded the Burlington Police Commission's role reviewing all public complaints and offering input to the Chief's disciplinary decisions.

We should bring this process to resolution by formalizing the Police Commission's role in a manner that promotes public trust and carefully protects procedural justice for our officers.

In 2020, City Attorney Eileen Blackwood and I submitted a Charter Change to this Council that would do exactly that, and that should provide a good foundation for the Council and the Administration to find common ground to complete this effort quickly.

Finally, we need to recommit as a community to the time-honored values and rules that make our downtown safe and welcoming to all.

As the police enforce our laws and ordinances that ensure both a welcoming downtown and our broader public safety, they must meet the high professional standards that this community has laid out for them. And when the police act lawfully and consistently with their training and policy – as they almost always do here in Burlington – we must have their backs.

With the same ballot that Burlingtonians voted by a large margin for renewed public safety, they also voted to expand inclusion and equity by giving all legal residents local voting rights.

Together, these votes are consistent with my long-held and often-articulated belief that public safety and racial justice should not be pitted against each other – Burlingtonians know that we must have both.

### **Racial Justice**

I am grateful to have new REIB Director, Kim Carson as a partner in ensuring that the City makes good on our racial justice commitments and goals. Director Carson has spent much of her initial months with us assessing the department's structure and capacity. As part of the budget process, she will bring forward a reorganization that maintains the City's current, major investment in the Department, which is the most expansive government agency focused on racial equity in Vermont, while restructuring REIB's resources to have a focused impact on our top priorities: equity in homeownership and health outcomes, expanded economic opportunity and equitable deployment of recovery funds, continuing to host a major annual Juneteenth event, and eliminating racial bias across City government.

### **Climate Emergency + Net Zero**

Continuing our City's proud, 40-year legacy of climate leadership, Burlington voters also took a very strong stand on climate action on Town Meeting Day, with over two thirds voting, for a second time, to create the first carbon pollution impact fee in the State -- proving that this efficient policy tool is, in fact, politically possible.

The latest UN climate report paints a stark reality: we have no time to lose in this existential fight. I want to thank Councilor Ben Traverse for already taking steps to turn this new charter authority into binding, lawful ordinance -- the Administration will work closely with you in the weeks ahead to get this done as soon as possible.

We believe that our Net Zero by 2030 plan is the most ambitious local climate goal in the country. It is also possible that our plan to capture waste heat and renewable steam from the McNeil plant is the oldest climate goal in the country.

We are closer than ever to creating such a system, and I am determined to make a final Go/No Go decision with the Council in 2023. If we can get over the remaining hurdles and the project is a Go, we will move immediately start construction.

### **Housing**

No housing issues were on the ballot this year, but we know it is on just about everyone's mind.

Most of the nearly 800 homes that we now have in construction are being built as part of two projects: over 400 new homes at CityPlace – which I am happy to say is now moving forwards at full speed – and approximately 250 currently at Cambrian Rise.

The City has been a very active partner in both of these projects, making critical policy changes and public investments to support both. However, it is the developers who actually take the financial risk and do the hard work of bringing these new homes into reality. I want to thank CHT, Cathedral Square, Eric Farrell, and CityPlace Partners for their progress and their commitment to Burlington.

We have another excellent opportunity to build new homes at scale like this on what is nearly 13.5 acres of surface parking lots in the heart of the South End Innovation District. I proposed this new zoning in 2021, and the Planning Commission approved it in January. I urge the new Ordinance Committee – which is clearly going to be busy in the year ahead – to also make review and approval of this new district a top priority in the months ahead. Our other major land use policy effort for 2023 is to create the Neighborhood Code, which is also a reform that we have been working hard on for over a year.

So far, this effort has documented that for the last fifty years Burlington – like cities across the country – made a series of zoning changes that effectively prohibited cottages, duplexes, triplexes and other small residential structures from being built in nearly 70% of the city's neighborhoods.

Whether these policy changes were well-intended or intentionally exclusionary, it is clear now that they work against not only our housing goals, but also our climate goals, our racial equity goals, our city revenue goals and much more.

The Neighborhood Code effort seeks to reverse this trend and legalize once again these small-scale residential buildings in every city neighborhood. Over time, the new code has the potential to create thousands of new places to live in Burlington.

The Council will receive a presentation from the Planning Department on this work this spring and our goal is to put a new ordinance in front of you before the end of the year. Another area of housing progress is the strengthening of our local Housing Trust Fund. In 2012, this dedicated tax was generating only \$215,000 a year. With the support of the voters in 2020 to increase the rate, along with recent revisions to our short-term rental and inclusionary zoning policies, the annual revenue to the Housing Trust Fund have increased 4-fold and to approximately \$800,000 a year.



This new funding creates new opportunities for action. I have asked CEDO to review our Housing Trust Fund policies and initiatives and propose changes that would allow these new local dollars to be invested in efforts to end homelessness, expand opportunities for first-generation buyers and those historically disenfranchised from homeownership, and to support the building of more inclusionary units.

### **State Government Action**

To ultimately solve the housing crises, however, we need action from state government. We need a clear plan for transitioning away from the emergency motel program, we need more housing navigators, and we need the state to do what Burlington, Winooski, South Burlington and other municipalities have been doing for years – acknowledge that we have a massive housing supply shortage and get serious about reforming the decades of wasteful, exclusionary, and just plain bad state policies that make it harder to build homes in Vermont than just about anywhere else.

Vermont Mayors, VLCT, housing advocates, design professionals and builders have been clear for years about changes to Act 250 that would have an immediate positive impact. For years, these pleas have been ignored, and that seems to be happening again. Just last Friday, the Vermont Senate voted to study Act 250 yet again, as has been done many times before. In the midst of a housing crisis so acute that 70 people sleep outside every night in Burlington, when renters are subjected to a vacancy rate of less than 1%, and when so many of our young families are unable to buy a home in this community, we are long past the time for more study. To end the housing crisis, we need the state to be all in on building many more homes.

But it is not just with housing that we need urgent, structural reform from the state. There are many other areas where Burlington is straining mightily to address our most serious challenges and we need far greater state government partnership.

Burlington voted overwhelmingly in 2014 for safe storage of firearms and the prohibition of guns in bars. Such laws would have made a difference during the spike in gun violence the last three years. Six of the last 17 crime guns recovered by the BPD were stolen. Twenty-five percent of the shootings were late night, bar-related incidents. Yet for 9 years, our charter changes have sat in the State House pinned to committee room walls. No other country tolerates this level of gun violence, and we should not either. If the state Legislature and the Governor will not allow Burlington to make our own common sense gun laws – then it is incumbent on them to act for all of Vermont now. To keep our kids, women, and even police officers safe, we need the state to be all in on ending gun violence.

Since 2018, Burlington, working closely with Let's Grow Kids, has invested over \$2 million in our Early Learning Initiative. The program is working – we helped open three new child care centers with up to 120 new high quality spots for young children, and this year, approximately 75 Burlington infants and toddlers will receive city scholarships to attend high quality child care centers.

However, the child care sector is regulated and funded in large part by the state, and the state needs to drive the structural reforms that will make sure all Vermont kids get a fair start in life.

Lucia Campriello is here tonight representing our partners in this effort, Let's Grow Kids. Let's Grow Kids has also been working for 7 years in the State House for comprehensive reform and had a big victory Friday when the Vermont Senate endorsed a new \$150 million plan. However, these reforms still have a long way to go. Lucia, I want Let's Grow Kids to know that Burlington will continue to do everything we can to support get this critical bill over the finish line. To do right by our kids, families and the talented workers caring for our youngest Vermonters, the state needs to be all in on ending the child care crisis.

As we have for many years, Burlington continues to drive innovation to end our heartbreaking drug crisis. Burlington is the lead funder for the new, innovative Vermonters for Criminal Justice Reform program. We have added five new social work positions at the Police Department to, in part, give us greater capacity to follow up with people that our officers come into contact with, and connect them with life-saving treatment. And with the Elmwood Emergency Shelter, we have created Vermont's first facility structured to bring a public health approach to ending homelessness.

But Burlington cannot end the drug crisis alone. We need to interdict the huge volume of illegal fentanyl that is pouring into this country from labs in China and Mexico, and the state needs to confront the reality that with fentanyl fully here in Vermont, the Hub and Spoke system is no longer working as it was designed. We must expand access to methadone, eliminate pre-authorization requirements to Buprenorphine, and legalize safe injection sites to save lives and create an important new path to life-saving treatment. In short, to stop the overdose deaths that are taking so many Vermonters in the prime of life, the state needs to be all in on harm reduction.

Burlington has been leading the nation on energy and climate policy for decades. With our Burlington Electric Department's Net Zero incentives, and the new historic incentives in President Biden's Inflation Reduction Act, there has never been a better place and time to go electric than Burlington in 2023.

But there is so much more to be done to create new sources of renewable energy and decarbonize the regional grid and economy. There are billions of federal dollars available for states that are focused on getting to Net Zero, creating green industries, and cutting costs for their residents. To do our part in ending the climate emergency, the state needs to lead and be all in on reducing fossil fuel use, and electrifying everything with renewable power.

When the state goes all in on these critical challenges, Burlington will benefit greatly. But you know what -- so will Bellows Falls, Hartland, and Canaan. Because for all the focus on the rural-urban divide in Montpelier and Washington, the reality is that our futures are tightly linked.

There is not a corner, valley, or village in these Green Mountains that would not benefit from decisive state action to create more high-quality child care opportunities, expand access to drug treatment, build more homes and support for the unhoused, stop gun violence, and boldly confront climate action.

Thank you all again for joining us on this annual night of democratic renewal. To my colleagues on the Council – I look forward to our shared work ahead.