



**Welcome to Auburn Hall. I'm mayor Jason Levesque.** As you can see, this State of the City address is being recorded in my office here at Auburn Hall. Like you, I'm abiding by state executive orders and I take comfort in knowing that the wonderful people that make up this great city are represented in this office. I fully believe that our faith in the future of Auburn, and the foundation established by our predecessors will guide us toward greatness for generations to come.

I want to take a moment today to thank City Manager Phil Crowell and our dedicated City staff for working so hard to keep our residents safe, and to keep everything running as smoothly as possible during these unprecedented times. Team Auburn truly is exceptional.

I also extend my thanks to the members of the City Council, for showing great leadership and courage throughout this pandemic. They continue to ask hard questions, put the people of Auburn first, and tackle difficult subjects with thoughtfulness.

Most importantly, I want to thank Auburn residents and visitors for their perseverance throughout the past year. It has been tumultuous and challenging to say the least. But you are an inspiration.

There are also some very special, deeply dedicated groups I want to recognize today.

To the Friends of Mt. Apatite, who partnered with city staff, took over 300 acres of underutilized city park and turned it into a world class biking and hiking destination...thank you.

To the Auburn Ski Association, which has worked quietly and steadfastly for YEARS to support winter activities in our city, providing opportunities for residents of all ages regardless of background...thank you.

To Auburn Suburban Baseball & Softball, for making your vision for a new state-of-the-art athletic facility on Stevens Mill Road a reality...thank you. That facility will be an asset to our community for generations.

To all the fans, coaches, players, and business supporters of Auburn's Sports programs: you make our dream of a culture of sport, with its lessons in competition, physical activity, and the pursuit of greatness a reality for so many. Thank you.

To the Auburn Business Association, Auburn Exchange Club, Optimist Club, Masons, and countless other civic and fraternal groups who work tirelessly to beautify our city, honor our Veterans, feed our families, and support our youth through scholarships & mentoring...thank you.

To our small business owners: For working hard and struggling to stay open through the pandemic. Your innovation, and entrepreneurial spirit is an inspiration to us all. For keeping your doors open, providing goods and services to our city, despite the sometimes punitive and reactive restrictions you have endured...thank you.

To the residents who volunteer their time, skills, and enthusiasm, whether at our emergency food bank or on one of our countless city committees and boards...you represent what is *best* about this city, in fact, you are truly the ones shaping our future, and it does not go unnoticed. Thank you.

My last "State of the City" message was in January of 2019. Since then, there have been many highs and lows. We celebrated Auburn's 150th anniversary in an epic, year-long display of community pride, a celebration of our history, honor, and heritage; and we also faced unprecedented challenges, from a turbulent election cycle, to a pandemic.

We have all worked so hard to overcome these challenges, and while we still have some ground to cover, we have shown that through determination, and hard work, we can weather anything that comes our way. Life will continue, it is which path we choose that will define our city and our lives in the future.

In 2020, despite the challenges and trials, we accomplished so much to be proud of. I don't want that to be overlooked as we face the crisis at hand.

Within both our City and School Government, we have new leadership, and you can be confident that the teams in place are truly experts in their respective fields. They have the will, the knowledge, and the ability to make incredible things happen. I hope you find that as exciting as I do.

Our schools have done an exemplary job, balancing education, the mental and physical health of more than 3,300 students, the construction of our new high school, and countless other things. We are fortunate to have so many caring and talented people protecting and nurturing our city's future.

Your representatives on the City Council have also been busy, from passing a budget that lowered - or kept flat - your property taxes, to making smart investments in equipment and infrastructure. This council continues to impress and encourage, with their focus on quality of life, strategic planning, and fiscal responsibility.

On the Economic front, Auburn has been setting records almost monthly. In fact, Auburn will soon see over 1 million new square feet of industrial and retail development throughout the city! From the new Target and Chipotle on Center Street, and Holy

Donut on Minot Avenue, to the expansion and hiring at countless existing and new companies throughout our city. Simply put, that means more jobs, and more opportunity...for those who already live here and for those who are and will be moving here in the not-too-distant future.

Speaking of that...we have also had record growth in home building and rehabilitation. You can't miss the transformation when you drive around town these days.

I'm delighted to report that we have completed - and dedicated - our beautiful new "Anniversary Park" in New Auburn, which features a huge new bell tower that is the forever home of the historic, treasured Bells of St. Louis Church. The tower is surrounded by more than 300 commemorative bricks and the park will be a special place for us to gather as a community.

In the near future, expect that the bell tower will be temporarily dwarfed by cranes erecting new buildings at the heart of our New, New Auburn Village.

While we have accomplished SO much, much remains to be done.

We still have problems within our city; from generational poverty, to food insecurity, to a lack of affordable and equitable housing, to an above-average property tax rate.

I truly believe that the best and most efficient solution to our problems is to promote growth, encourage and allow for more investment, specifically, the construction and sale of market rate homes.

And when I say more, I mean about 2,000 more homes, over the next five to seven years. These will not be faceless houses, these will be homes with real, hard-working people, raising families and building memories. I want us to embrace this solution and stop making excuses for our lack of action. We do not have to choose between competing interests, we can, in fact, "have our cake and eat it, too." We can balance our commitment to protect our environment with our desire to grow our downtown, and our residential and industrial base.

Auburn's population is around 24,000, spread out over nearly 70 square miles of land. That is bigger than Portland, South Portland, Westbrook, and Cape Elizabeth combined!

We have the space, the perfect location within the state, and the infrastructure to comfortably handle an additional 2,000 new market rate homes.

What happens if we achieve this? For starters:

- Our taxes will go down by approximately 20%. We are already paying for and have the infrastructure, and public safety staff to handle this influx of residents.
- New industry and commerce will locate here, further enhancing our quality of life and decreasing our reliance on residential property taxes.
- Our existing businesses will have more employees and customers and they will THRIVE, not just survive.

In short, our city will become more sustainable and robust. This is not wishful thinking, it is reality, backed by data and examples across the US. And it can be our reality here in Auburn!

By revisiting our archaic, protectionist and - in my opinion - biased zoning ordinances, we will promote equity for all residents, allowing them the opportunity that others have had, regardless of race, religion, or creed. We need to be fair to those who work hard but are currently unable to achieve their fullest potential. Expanded housing supply will keep home prices affordable, allowing our residents to achieve the American dream of home ownership. Data shows that this is the best path out of generational poverty. Who are we to pick those that can or can't raise their families here because we continue to promote unfair zoning ordinances, when we have the ability to change them?

Last year, we were at a crossroads, and I feel that we choose the "path less traveled." The path that Auburn chose to follow leads toward the belief that individuals, not government, will ensure that our city continues to grow and become vibrant and sustainable for future generations. I want us to strip away needless regulations and red tape. When we do, the people in our community will do the right thing. And we will **all** grow and prosper. *I believe that the time to put our promise into action is now.*

We must stay focused on growth as the only true and honest way toward prosperity. Prosperity for all our residents, not just a select few. Investment from the private sector should continue to be sought out, encouraged, and embraced. Some critics of growth and equity will denounce 'developers' as Scrooge-like villains. They will use fear tactics and emotions to perpetuate a negative and toxic stereotype. It is not true. Ask yourself, what developer would invest money into a city with the purpose of hurting the very thing that drew their investment? NONE.

My promise to those looking to invest in Auburn: Come here with an open mind. Know that you will find willing and welcoming partners at city hall. Know that you will find regulatory consistency within our government. Know that once you commit to our city the residents will welcome you and take pride in your success. Take Chipotle's national record-setting opening day as a great example!

And so, to the City Council: In the year ahead, I ask you to propose and approve changes to our Comprehensive Plan and our zoning ordinances, making them more equitable for all residents, promoting growth and investment.

I ask you join me in supporting and encouraging developers who want to invest in our city, not only because of profit, but for the opportunity to help make the city better and more appealing.

I ask you to focus on proposing solutions and compromise, versus partisan talking points and the will of special interest groups, who are narrowly focused on their mission statement versus the growth of our city.

I ask you to make it a goal to revise our regulations, stripping all but those that are imperative for the health and safety of those that live, work, and play in our City.

And lastly, I ask you work toward a budget that requires no increase to our already high property tax rate. Weigh each investment against its potential return.

To our regional partners: I ask you to continue to work with us on a variety of endeavors. But do so in a fair and equitable fashion. The time of relying on the generosity of Auburn taxpayers to subsidize your undertakings is at an end. Fairness, and honesty must prevail above all else.

To our City administration and staff: Thank you for taking policy and making it reality. I know it can be a thankless job, but I appreciate your ongoing efforts to grow our city. The future will hold challenges as you continue to make government more efficient. But keep moving forward and the results will make all of us stronger.

To our schools & our educators: You are challenged this year like no other and I cannot begin to thank you all for the hard work you have all done over the past 10 months. But the reality is that what we are - and have been doing - is NOT working. I applaud our new Superintendent, Dr. Brown, and our School Committee Chair for leading the conversation forward and proposing new ways for Auburn to have one of the top school systems in the State. Embrace change. Embrace a unified path forward and do not believe the tired excuses that have been used to justify historically poor performance for a decade. Your city and its youth are depending on results - not excuses - to succeed and build a better life for themselves and their families.

To our great volunteer groups and residents: Do more great things. Never hesitate to ask me for support, to help find solutions to problems, in order to make your dreams a reality.

And lastly, to the people of Auburn: You have a decision to make. Do you want to move forward together, toward prosperity? Is Auburn to lead or are we to follow? I have confidence that your decision will be – as it has been for 150 years - for our city to move forward...with “no backward steps.”

I look forward to when we can all gather again as a community. I look forward to co-hosting Maine’s Bicentennial parade in Auburn this year. I look forward to a return to normalcy.

I look forward to spending time with you, my friends, and neighbors at our local businesses debating potholes and taxes without a mask after 9pm!

And I look forward to together, celebrating New Year’s 2022 in our beautiful downtown.

Because I know that when we will look back at 2021, it will be with a sense of pride and accomplishment. And **I trust that history will judge us favorably on our ability to overcome and grow; and to thrive in the face of adversity.**

Thank you for your continued trust and support as we move forward to a happy and healthy new year! It is a profound honor to be your mayor.