

State of the City Address 2020

Delivered by Mayor Carol Dutra-Vernaci

Good Evening. I am Mayor Carol Dutra-Vernaci. It is my pleasure to deliver our 2020 State of the City Address.

I am also pleased to be joined tonight by Patricia Lessard of Linguabee. Patricia will be providing translation tonight in American Sign Language.

We will be taking questions live after the speech is over. If you are following us on Facebook, please post your questions throughout my speech in the comment section.

If you are attending via Blue Jeans, please send us your questions via the chat function.

We will try our best to get around to all of your questions tonight.

Before I get into my speech tonight, I want to make sure you know how to stay informed on everything I'll be discussing this evening, as well as other city news.

If you use social media: you can follow the City of Union City on Facebook, Nextdoor, Twitter and Instagram.

Recordings of important city presentations, such as this one, can also be found on the City of Union City's YouTube channel.

We will also be streaming this presentation, along with others, on Channel 15 – which is our UCTV.

If email is your preferred method of receiving information, you can subscribe to our e-newsletter at www.unioncity.org/e-newsletter.

And, lastly, you can go to our website any time of day or night at www.unioncity.org to find relevant information about trending topics.

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I think we can all agree that 2020 has certainly been a year like no other. It has been a year of firsts, and not in a good way. We have all had to develop new coping and life skills just to get through the day.

Each and every one of us are facing multiple issues all at once, when dealing with just one of them would be quite a task on its own.

The COVID-19 pandemic has claimed over 210,000 lives in our country and has changed all of our daily lives with no end in sight.

In Alameda County, we have lost more than 410 people: people who were our neighbors, our friends, and our family. In March, nobody imagined that we would be here 7 months later still sheltering in place.

Police shootings of black men and women across our country have cities asking “what do we need to do better”? And, also, how can we contribute at the local level to solving racial injustice, so that we can create a more just society for all?

Climate change has never looked us more straight in the face than it is now.

Wildfires are devastating communities around us in what feels like a marathon fire season. As a matter of fact, the news said today that more than 4 million acres of land have been burned throughout California so far this fire season. This unprecedented figure, an area larger than the state of Connecticut, is more than double the previous record for the most land burned in a single year in California.

Heat waves are becoming more and more the norm. The combination of the heat and the fires has officially landed the Bay Area on the list of having the worse air quality in the world.

If you live in a home without air conditioning, which is many in Union City, you have had to somehow deal with the problem of trying to stay cool amid a heat wave, while keeping your windows closed to avoid the harmful impacts of poor air quality.

And as if that isn't enough, PG&E is also shutting off our power routinely, and sometimes during a heat wave, in order to protect the electric grid from overuse and to prevent severe weather from threatening the electric system.

With all of these heavy experiences on our plates, I want to take the time to recognize you.

Each and every one of you has had to champion your own obstacles during this incredibly challenging year.

Remember to take a break when you need it. Keep up the good work in staying safe from the Coronavirus. And, when you feel you can, let's continue to find ways to support our community through this rough time.

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Speaking of the Coronavirus. Here's some information I would like to share.

The city's emergency operations center was activated back in March and since then, many traditional city services have been re-oriented towards providing critical pandemic relief to those in need, such as our senior, low-income and unhoused members of our community.

We immediately put into place a city moratorium on rent evictions tied to people losing their jobs as a result of COVID-19, which is still in place today to protect renters.

The emergency operations center, under the leadership of our City Manager, Joan Malloy, is working daily to track and monitor information about the Coronavirus, so that

they may quickly coordinate resources if need be and get critical information and aid into the hands of people who can benefit from it.

Our Senior Center, which has had its doors closed throughout the pandemic, has been the site of daily food distributions to our senior population.

Since March, over 7000 bags of groceries have been provided to seniors and low-income families amid the shelter in place.

I want to thank a few of our nonprofit friends who have been a critical part of making these food programs a success.

Thank you to Paddy Iyer, the executive director of the Daily Bowl who has helped to organize food services to the Senior Center.

Thank you to Kelly Barron from the Tri-City Volunteer Food Bank who helps to coordinate 100 bags of groceries the first and third Monday of every month.

And thank you to Lara Calvert and the team at Spectrum Community Services for continuing to provide their drive-up lunch program every day, Monday – Friday. The drive-up program has doubled in size since the start of the pandemic. They are now serving over 40 people a day on average, and have handed out a grand total of 5,375 meals at the Senior Center since the start of the pandemic.

I also want to recognize our Community and Recreation Services staff at the senior center who have served as a vital point of contact for our senior community during the pandemic. Not only have they provided a location and an extra set of hands for these food programs, but, they have, also, diligently made check-in phone calls to over 500 seniors on a weekly basis since the start of the shelter-in-place order.

The staff have also continued to operate our CAREavan program, which provides safe overnight parking for homeless families and individuals, and has been hosting a mobile hygiene unit. These are both critical services for our homeless, pandemic or no pandemic.

Times like these also call for innovation. The Community and Recreation Services Department developed and launched an entirely new online service called the Virtual Recreation Center. The Virtual Recreation Center was born out of a need for residents to take care of their bodies and their spirits during the pandemic, in a way that is socially distanced and safe.

Another critical role that the Community and Recreation Services Department has taken on is to provide childcare for the kids of essential workers in Union City.

The emergency operations center also works to support our nonprofits who are, in many cases, the first line of contact to the most at-risk segments of our community.

I want to take a moment to recognize Jaime Jaramillo and his staff at Centro De Servicios and Nancy George and her staff at the Union City Family Center.

These two organizations have been working tirelessly throughout the pandemic to serve families in need.

Centro de Servicios routinely serves 400 to 500 people a week with its food distribution. I want to thank Anna for being the driving force behind the food distribution on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

The Union City Family Center is providing critical life supplies, such as diapers and pantry items, for up to 250 people a day per day.

If you are interested in helping out those most in need during this time, please consider calling the Union City Family Center or Centro de Servicios to see how you can help.

The most exciting and timely news I have the pleasure of sharing with you tonight is the recent launching of a COVID-19 Response Grant Program for rental assistance, food security and small business assistance.

Through this grant program, \$440,000 in grant funds and forgivable loans will be distributed to businesses, residents and nonprofits most in need during this challenging time.

I want to thank East Bay Community Energy, our electricity provider, for providing up to \$50,000 to the City that we will distribute in the form of grant funds to community-based organizations who are distributing food throughout our community.

Our Residential Rental Assistance Program will pay for up to two months of back rent or up to \$3,500 for households earning up to 80% of area median income. This program is intended for those Union City renters who are affected by the loss of income due to COVID-19. I am proud to report that up to \$190,000 of Federal Community Development Block Grant funds will be used to provide this rental assistance.

The Road to Recovery Small Business Assistance Program will provide forgivable loans of up to \$10,000 to local businesses who are struggling to afford operational adjustments or cover their expenses. The City is able to do this thanks to \$200,000 in CARES Act funding.

All three of these assistance programs are currently open and accepting applications. You can go to the City's website to learn more.

We know that businesses, nonprofits and residents are facing significant challenges and we hope that these assistance programs can provide some level of relief, even if just a rent payment or special equipment needed to run a business safely in this environment.

Now I will tell you about the challenges our Public Works department is facing due to the pandemic. Right now, we are down 10 people on our maintenance staff. This is a combination of a few vacant positions but mostly our work furlough crew. The work furlough crew consists of people doing community service for restitution through the Alameda County court system.

The work furlough program stopped when shelter in place was adopted. This equates to 400 fewer hours worked per week, each and every week. Our work furlough crew typically addressed dumping, trash pick-up in the parks, and other labor needs. The program will not be reinstated until the County is confident that Covid-19 is under control.

At the same time we are down workers to perform the above functions, we have added new responsibilities to our Public Works staff, including overseeing expanded janitorial contracts, ensuring that City facilities are compliant with the County Shelter in Place order, and tracking and delivering PPE to all city facilities and city partners.

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Before I move on from the pandemic, I want to thank you for taking this virus seriously and doing your part to stop the spread.

However, more awareness and community education is needed, particularly with our youth and Latinx populations, the latter of which has been disproportionately impacted by the virus in Union City and in Alameda County.

To create awareness, we recently ran a youth photo contest called “Why I Wear a Mask”.

I am excited to announce the three winners of this contest and I think you will join me in applauding them for showcasing their artistic expression on such an important topic.

The three pictures are here on my right.

Independent photographer and Stanford educator, Don Feria, who grew up in Union City, judged the photo entries and selected the three winning entries.

Don’s work has been commissioned by Nike, Stanford University, Discovery Channel and the MacArthur Foundation.

Emmalie Perez is the winner of our top prize of \$100. Carl Denzel Estrada came in second place and will receive \$75 as a prize. And, Angelo Agbuya came in third place and will receive \$50 as a prize.

In Angelo’s photo, we see him wearing a mask so that he can safely do the hobbies that he likes. In his submission, Angelo explained that “We should think about this historical moment we are living through and remember it, so we can one day, share our story with generations to come.”

In Carl’s photograph, we see a friend of Carl’s who is caught in the shot just as he is putting on his mask.

And finally, in Emmalie’s winning photo, we see a picture of a lonely child wearing a mask. As Don puts it, the picture shows a powerful narrative of how we serve the generations following us and how those generations will lead *us* to a brighter future.

Thank you to everyone who participated in the contest. I also want to especially thank Union City's Chamber of Commerce for sponsoring the cash prizes for the contest winners.

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Many of you who follow the city closely know that we have a small, but hard working team of city staff who are often wearing multiple hats in order to keep up our city services to enhance our quality of life.

This last year, it has been one unexpected event after another.

A year ago last September, the City was hit with a cyber attack that crippled city services. I am proud we made the decision not to pay the over one million dollar ransom that was asked for.

Critical data from our Finance and Police Department were impacted. We are still rebuilding our information technology systems today and recovering police and financial data.

On November 23, 2019, two of our youth were murdered causing the community an immense amount of pain and suffering. By February 2020, our Union City Police Department, was able to solve the crime and arrest the perpetrators, after investing over 5,300 hours of detective work. Their excellent police work and dedication brought recognition from the State Attorney General Xavier Becerra.

On March 3, the stock market took a dive amid the COVID-19 outbreak announced just 10 days before. As a result, the March 3 Primary Election took place with significant voter uncertainty. Unfortunately, Measure U, a measure seeking the renewal of our public safety parcel tax, was not approved by the voters.

On March 23, the City declared a local emergency and COVID-19 became the City's top priority.

On May 25, George Floyd died at the hands of Minneapolis Police and local cities, like ours, were immediately thrust into a conversation about police accountability.

During the civil unrest that followed, damage to Union Landing businesses was minimal because of the quick response of our city manager. She called in the police and public works staff that Sunday evening to protect Union Landing. This was a fragile time because businesses had been closed by Covid-19 and further damage could have been devastating.

I commend our dedicated men and women that worked that night and the days after.

Despite all of these major events, one after the other, easily consuming a majority of resources in the city at any given time, staff still managed to get well underway in accomplishing 22 of 59 strategies identified in our five-year strategic plan.

Next time you see a city staff person, thank them. They have accomplished many of the City Council's priorities despite managing multiple emergencies in the City over the last year.

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I first brought the idea to develop a strategic plan to the City Council in December 2018; and by Fall of 2019, the City Council adopted our first ever strategic plan.

The entire City Council joined me and agreed that establishing a strategic plan for the City was vitally important to pursue goals that include stabilizing city finances, creating long-term fiscal sustainability, producing high quality services through a commitment to government best practices and employee development and instituting forward thinking practices that build a safe community and a strong local economy.

After extensive planning and outreach, I am proud to report that the City's General Plan was completed and adopted by the City Council last December.

The newly adopted General Plan strives to position Union City for success over the next 25 years in a number of key areas, such as land use, economic development, health and safety and environmental sustainability.

I am also excited to announce changes in land use that were made in the area of 7th Street and Decoto Rd., including the site of the former Air Liquide facility, which will now allow for the building of new residential and commercial sites.

The City is currently processing an application for this area that will include new housing, shopping, and parks. The project proposes enhanced bicycle and pedestrian facilities that will connect the neighborhood to the surrounding area. We will be releasing the project's environmental document for public review next month, which will be accessible on the City's website.

In addition, the City has begun work on a Station District Specific Plan. The Station District is the area around the BART station that is envisioned to be a world-class, transit-oriented community with new retail, public amenities, high-density housing, and job centers all linked by bicycle and pedestrian facilities.

Part of that vision will be carried out over the next two years when improvements to BART and the long-awaited east side entrance to BART is completed. The new entrance will provide a free and accessible connection for pedestrians to the east and west side of BART, linking housing to commercial centers and improving circulation all around the BART station.

If you live in or are familiar with the area, you know that circulation is critically needed to support the vision of the Station District.

Quarry Lakes Parkway, which has been a part of city planning for over 30 years, will create a pedestrian and bicycle network that will connect regional parks from the hills to

the bay. It will also build a much needed local roadway to provide access and circulation for the new development in the area.

The regional parks I just mentioned include Dry Creek Regional Park, Quarry Lakes Regional Park, Alameda Creek trails, Ardenwood Historic Farm, and Coyote Hills Regional Park.

Bike lanes will be provided on the Parkway for experienced cyclists who wish to commute to and from work and a multi-use path will be fully separated from vehicles to provide safe access for recreational cyclists and pedestrians.

High speed fiber will be installed under the Parkway to provide faster internet services for households.

Creating this vision for the City and the Station District and actively pursuing its implementation has required intensive planning work and hundreds of dedicated staff hours.

We look forward to seeing this project come to life over the coming years.

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Over the course of this past year, a committee was formed to help the City develop a new Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan. I want to thank the members of this committee, who are bike and pedestrian enthusiasts themselves, for advising the City on this important plan. In fact, we will celebrate one such project next year with the construction of the long awaited new bike lanes on Union City Boulevard. The funding for this came from the Alameda County Transportation Commission.

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On the topic of completing projects.

We have completed the construction of a pedestrian crossing at Dyer Street and Deborah Drive. This is a highly trafficked area adjacent to Veteran's Park and we knew that safety needed to be improved.

A rehabilitation project was also recently completed at Contempo Park, which included the reconstruction of the picnic area, newly paved pathways, upgrades to the parking lot and new, accessible drinking fountains.

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Supporting business owners through the pandemic, and helping property owners at Union Landing and other commercial centers to adapt to changing market trends has been a key focus for us in the last year.

Over the summer, we were very fortunate to receive a donation of 10,000 masks from our Friendship City, Guro, South Korea. Our Economic and Community Development staff used a portion of the donated masks to launch a campaign with our Union Landing

business owners called the ‘Wear A Mask’ campaign. Participating businesses were given the masks to support the safety of their employees, and to also hand out to customers, to ensure that everyone has the PPE that they need to slow the spread of COVID-19. The mask donations were also distributed to the Union City library and to our community-based partner organizations.

It seems like it was ages ago but we did have new businesses open at Union Landing this past year. I want to give a shout out to Ross, Ocean Bar & Grill, Burlington, and Nick the Greek as our newest businesses.

We will soon be welcoming Video Only to Union Landing this coming November.

Staff helped form the Union Landing Property Owners Association to support their efforts to maintain the center as a retail and entertainment destination.

In other economic news, I’m happy to say that Union City is home to several businesses that are considered essential during the pandemic.

These included businesses in the fields of medical device manufacturing, food production, and contract manufacturing.

One of the strategies identified in the Strategic Plan as a City Council Priority is to analyze the feasibility of transforming warehouses to attract high-value industrial and commercial uses.

A team of City staff, in partnership with the Economic Development Advisory Team, has continued to study this area.

Our industrial sector real estate vacancy stands at only 17 buildings. Of the 17 only one offers a significant business attraction opportunity. The remaining 16 are a much smaller square footage.

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In the area of affordable housing, this past July the City Council approved Lazuli Landing, a 100% affordable housing project, that will consist of 81 below market rate apartments and 16 of the 81 units will have a homeless preference. This is the vacant property on Mission Blvd. Between D and E Street.

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Our Union City Police Department remains dedicated to serving the community and reducing crime and the fear of crime for all. Our police officers use a “service from the heart” approach and in these tough times, they recognize the importance of serving the public with care, compassion, and empathy.

Our Police Department remains focused on three core areas, which include:

Reviewing and maintaining policy and procedures consistent with best practices, changes in law, and community priorities.

Providing enhanced training in de-escalation, crisis intervention, mental health, implicit bias, and employee wellness.

And, ensuring open and consistent communication via virtual meetings, social media, and other platforms to stay engaged with the community and employees.

These focus areas align well with the outcome of a conversation we had with our community over the course of the summer about how we could improve policing in Union City.

As mayor, in response to the death of George Floyd and other recent high profile shootings of black men and women, I signed the Obama Foundation's "Commit to Action" pledge, which committed Union City to reviewing its use of force policies and engaging the community on this topic.

I want to thank Vice Mayor Emily Duncan for leading this community engagement process and a committee that consisted of Councilmember Pat Gacoscos, Human Relations Commission Chair Melissa Shuen-Mallory, and Human Relations Commissioners Michele Williams-Smith and Jonathan Pettey.

The committee developed a set of recommendations for reimagining policing in Union City that were ultimately approved by the City Council last month.

We would not have been able to do this without our community members, including members of our Union City Police Department, who courageously stepped forward to share their deeply personal experiences and perspectives about policing.

We took a shared-responsibility approach that emphasized all parties being at the table to have the conversation and find solutions.

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We were happy to welcome the new Chief of the Alameda County Fire Department, Willie McDonald, who started his job just recently. Chief McDonald comes to us from the Las Vegas Fire Department where he was chief for the last seven years. I would like to add that he is no stranger to the Bay Area. He served with the Fremont Fire Department from 2002-2004 and also the cities of Foster City, San Mateo, and San Jose.

Chief McDonald is leading the implementation of nine key initiatives that are considered the Department's roadmap for the future with a heavy focus in the areas of policy development and decision making; environmental sustainability and accountability towards the Department's mission and core values.

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The last area of our strategic plan that the City Council has been diligently focused on is fiscal stability and fiscal sustainability.

The strategic plan provides a detailed financial roadmap for the City.

Its strategies are designed to foster fiscal health through disciplined long-term planning, cost control, heightened efficiency, increased revenue and cost recovery.

We identified a structural deficit to our General Fund back in 2017 and began taking steps to close this budget gap.

Many think the solutions to addressing a budget deficit are simple. But, in fact, solving a long-term structural deficit is complicated and requires the city to make tough decisions about city services competing for scarce dollars.

Since the adoption of the current biennial budget, the city has reduced expenses by \$4.2 million in order to maintain a balanced budget.

These budget cuts have resulted in reduced library and community center hours, the closure of an underutilized fire station, freezing all vacant positions, and eliminating community policing and school resource officers.

The City Council has been diligent about sticking to our policy of a 20% cash reserve, and we are currently exceeding that today with a cash reserve of about 25%.

The City Council commissioned a Management Audit in early 2018, which identified some additional areas the City needs to explore for budget savings, but even if fully implemented, the City still would need to make budget cuts or identify additional revenue sources.

I was one of 40 mayors chosen from around the country to participate in the Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative Program. The program is focused on responding to the COVID-19 crisis and preparing for a socially, racially, and economically equitable recovery.

Last week's session speaker was Professor Linda Bilmes who is an expert on budgetary and public financial issues. Her conversation with us was around what she called a perfect fiscal storm of revenue shortfalls for cities and towns meaning that a budget crisis will hit big time due to the coronavirus when a new fiscal year begins on July 1st.

According to Professor Bilmes, cities around the country are facing declining tax revenues, less local aid, and small business failures, coupled with risk worries among municipal bond investors that will make it more difficult to raise new funds. According to her, even with the methods we discussed at the session to make ends meet, it will not be enough to prevent cuts in local services.

As I just mentioned, we were already making cuts before the pandemic hit. Adding the fiscal realities of the pandemic to the mix makes matching expenses to revenues even more challenging as we anticipate a slow fiscal recovery over the next five years. But, we are up to the challenge.

We are asking you to weigh in on the decisions ahead of us.

We know that the public safety parcel tax will sunset in June 2021 and the half-cent sales tax will sunset in April 2025.

The upcoming expiration of these revenue sources means that the City will need to make another \$11 million in budget cuts over the next several years unless new sources of revenue are identified.

When the City Council learned about the impacts of these two tax measures going away, we acted unanimously to place Measure WW on the November 3, 2020 General Election ballot.

We know no one likes taxes as they are enforced exactions and not voluntary contributions. However, with the reality of our financial situation, we are giving the residents an option that will help us to preserve essential services in the city.

Measure WW is an 8-year 5% utility users' tax.

It would only be levied on electricity, gas, video and telecommunication services. It would NOT be levied on water or sewer service.

Measure WW is a general fund tax that could raise approximately \$6.1 million per year in new funding that could help preserve essential services in Union City.

Seniors, 70 years of age and above, and low-income residents are eligible for an exemption from this tax.

I encourage you to take the time to review the facts and educate yourselves on Measure WW before you vote.

More information can be found at www.unioncity.org/measureww

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I would characterize this year's state of the city address as the good, the bad, and the ugly. However, in reviewing the past 12 months, you can see that we have had one heck of a time as a city, and we got through it. We know the next 12 months and beyond will also require teamwork and effective communication with each and everyone of you. I started tonight's presentation mentioning the ways you can stay informed. Please do take advantage of those methods.

I thank you all for listening this evening and be sure to contact us with any questions or comments you have. We are in this together.

Now, as I mentioned at the beginning, this is our opportunity to answer questions that may have come up throughout the presentation.