

City of Perth Amboy's State of the City Address
presented by the Honorable Mayor Helmin J. Caba
March 29, 2022 | 6PM
Perth Amboy High School Auditorium
Theme: Building a Brighter Future

Good evening, Perth Amboy family, friends, and loved ones.

Antes que nada le quiero dar gracias a Dios, porque con él todo es posible. Estoy muy agradecido de estar aquí con cada uno de ustedes y por darme la confianza para servir y cumplir el sueño de todos para mejorar nuestra hermosa ciudad. Juntos! Muchas Gracias.

Thank you for joining us for the 2022 State of the City Address in person at Perth Amboy High School and streaming live.

Thank you to Dr. David Roman, Principal Heidelberg, and the Board of Education for allowing us to host this special event at my beloved high school alma mater.

I am incredibly thankful to be the Mayor of this beautiful city we all love.

I am pleased to have our elected officials from the state, county, and local levels joining us this evening.

Thank you, Assembly Speaker Craig Coughlin, for the generosity of your time and thoughtful introduction. Your unyielding dedication to our city and state is unmatched and we are thankful to have you champion for us.

Thank you to our city council members for keeping the lines of communication open with my administration in the best interest of our residents.

I also express my appreciation to all our city employees.

Please stand from your seat to be recognized.

The outstanding work each of you perform every day in meeting the needs of our residents enhances their quality of life and represents what building a connected community is all about. You deserve a rewarding applause.

And lastly, to our city residents.

You are the fabric of Perth Amboy and contribute significantly to the progress and advancement of our beautiful City. You are appreciated.

It is also important to take the time this evening to remember those we've lost in the last year.

There is a scripture reading whose words have offered comfort to those who have mourned a loss of a loved one and have also brought joy to those experiencing life's miracles. These words have truly stood the test of time.

The scripture begins with, "For everything there is a season, a time for every activity under heaven,"

I ask for a moment of silence as we remember all our loved ones.

Thank you.

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When I stepped into office, the city's financial conditions, budget deficit, and the public health emergency of COVID-19 were alarming, as they threatened our city finances and services to our residents.

We have emerged stronger than ever. And today, we are beginning to transform our city together and build a Perth Amboy, where everyone can thrive.

In the last year, we adapted and learned our strengths.

We saw small businesses innovate to survive and our neighbors stepped up to support each other.

I take this moment to thank

- Governor Phil Murphy
- Our legislators from District 19 - Assembly Speaker Craig Coughlin, Senator Joe Vitale, and Assemblywoman Yvonne Lopez
- Our esteemed Middlesex County Commissioners
- County Administrator and staff for their unyielding commitment to our city.

Our future is being shaped in new ways, full of new possibilities because of our partnerships, thank you!

Everything my administration has done to date has been with a determined effort to be fiscally lean without compromising any services to our residents.

Our focus is and continues to be on

- Economic growth
- Public safety
- and Building Community

In 2021, despite the challenges, we surprised our community and shocked the naysayers by not raising taxes.

And this year, our administration proposed a stable budget to our city council members, once again, with no municipal tax increase.

We were able to balance our City budget, fund our priorities and provide fiscal relief for our residents. I want to recognize our budget committee, leading with

- Michael Greene, our Business Administrator,
- Jill Goldy, our Chief Financial Officer,
- and our city directors for their diligence and efficiency

This demonstrates that we take our fiscal responsibilities very serious with the decisions we make. We also earned an "A+" long-term rating, citing our stable fiscal management and budgetary flexibility from Standard & Poor's, one of the nation's top credit rating agencies,

What does this mean for the City of Perth Amboy?

- It means increased purchasing power and provides better lending opportunities with lower interest rates.

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Housing is also essential to the economic strength of our city.

When we can attract and retain residents to invest, we build Perth Amboy up.

Our city's future developments will look to provide high-quality housing to stimulate our economy and strengthen our neighborhoods.

When the city conducted its housing study, it highlighted the need to develop luxury projects to attract disposable incomes while protecting our current residents with safe and affordable opportunities.

When the housing element was adopted by our city council last year, it allowed Perth Amboy to begin collecting fees from developers to address our housing and rehabilitation requirements.

In the fall of 2021, we collected our first development fee in the amount of \$2.25M. With this new funding, we plan to rehab homes to be safe and affordable in Perth Amboy.

Here are some of the additional accomplishments in housing, development and business:

- We re-established our Rent Control Board
- We awarded \$150,000 dollars in Tenant-Based Rental Assistance
- And received \$1.4M from the American Rescue Plan through the Department of Housing and Urban Development that will help stabilize those at risk of homelessness.
- I want to thank the Puerto Rican Association for Human Development, the Jewish Renaissance Foundation, the Raritan Bay Area YMCA, and the Perth Amboy Housing Authority for their support in executing these initiatives.
- We are also in the final phases in the street repayment, expanded waterfront promenade, and pier in the Harbortown community.
- And are working to enhance our city's entrance, by cleaning up the contaminated old Celotex property to beautify the Gateway Neighborhood.

And great news, everyone, we are finally revitalizing our train station, with the ground breaking scheduled later this Spring! I want to thank Governor Phil Murphy, our legislators, NJ Transit, and previous administrations for their advocacy and commitment to making this possible.

Perth Amboy is a transportation hub with a solid retail base in our downtown and a strong network of institutions, including healthcare, education, social services, and workforce development- all committed to collaboration.

With these assets, we look to expand our business corridor and invest more opportunities for our businesses. Last fall, the Business Improvement District Board of Directors unanimously voted to endorse the Business Improvement Expansion Project. The project is set to enhance economic development programming and expand business benefits to all merchants, city-wide.

Last summer, I joined Lt. Governor Sheila Oliver, as she signed the new legislation to reform the Urban Enterprise Zone program. The UEZ program supports 37 of the 564 municipalities across New Jersey, including Perth Amboy for revitalization and business growth in urban communities.

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And I am pleased to say that the funds will reinvest nearly \$1 million in public improvements, sanitation, economic development, and financial assistance programs, throughout all of our local commercial districts, with a commitment to continue the program for the next 10 years.

And with our dedicated County partners, Destination 2040 and various NJ state departments, our path to opportunity will be paved with physical and capital improvements in our downtown district.

As we move the city forward, we realize the importance of strategic planning, understanding our City's needs and the ever changing landscape of urban municipalities. For those reasons, we've initiated the updating of our Master Plan, which will guide our investments and initiatives citywide for the next 20 years.

Thanks to our directors, Tashilee Vazquez, Noelia Colon, and Annie Hindenlang, for their dedication to these projects.

I'm proud of how our city has responded and continues to respond to the pandemic. We are a city that innovates to survive.

The partnership with Middlesex County and its Telehealth programs is an example of the need to adapt to create opportunities to extend the reach and expand healthcare services to our residents and reimagine how our health policies need to address our communities' most pressing health and wellness needs.

Each of us stepped up to turn the tide of this pandemic inclusive of our COVID-19 Taskforce, whom I'd like to personally thank for

- Establishing Middlesex County Vocational School as a supersite for vaccinations.
- Hosting over 40+ mobile vaccination clinics
- Distributing educational materials about vaccinations and myths versus facts, establishing COVID-19 testing locations, creating a dedicated city hotline, organizing volunteers to canvass in the business district, and deploying a series of social media and website campaigns.
- In addition to feeding over 27,000 people.

This was indeed a coordinated effort of over 40 partnerships, including

- Governor Murphy
- Our state legislators
- NJ Department of Health
- Middlesex County Department of Health
- Hackensack Meridian Raritan Bay Medical Center
- The Jewish Renaissance Medical Center and Foundation
- Raritan Bay Area YMCA
- McFoods
- NJ Community Food Bank
- US Foods
- The NJ Feed Program
- Our houses of worship, businesses, schools and countless volunteers.

And I want to thank our OEM Director, Acting Police Chief Cattano and Dianne Roman for leading the task force to an 88% vaccination rate in 2021.

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Public safety continues to be our top priority. We recognize the critical role our officers play in keeping Perth Amboy safe.

To enhance our response, solve and deter crimes, we look to expand staff and technology, such as

- An intelligence unit
- State of the Art cameras
- And license plate readers

We also have increased our police force by 17 officers, the single most hire of police officers in Perth Amboy's history, and added to the ranks of our Special 1 and Special 2 Officers.

We are reimagining public safety and policing through technology and innovation, moving Perth Amboy into a smart city, a City of the Future.

In addition,

- We signed the PBA Contract and have reached an agreement with the FOP moving the contract towards ratification.
- We passed the ordinance that created the Citizens Public Safety Advisory Board. A special thank you to Harry Pozycki and the Citizens' Campaign for your advocacy.
- We've increased our patrols in our parks, waterfront, and our business district.
- We have also expanded our Juvenile Bureau's Station House Adjustment Program for the diversion of youth offenders.
- And increased our community outreach through positive interactions and partnerships.

A strong relationship of mutual trust with our residents is key to maintaining public safety. And our police and fire know how important it is to foster these relationships with our school districts, especially with our youth.

Last year, Felix Velez, home/school liaison of Perth Amboy High School's Personalized Learning Program, identified a student exhibiting a decline in his motivation, academics, and attendance.

The student, Andres Castillo, dreamed of a career in criminal justice, and there was a need to help restore his confidence to see his future. Felix reached out to our juvenile police bureau for assistance.

Detective Rafelito Cruz and Sergeant Jessica DeJesus responded immediately and coordinated a tour of our police department, introduced him to other officers, and allowed him to experience a day in the life of an officer, they even sang him happy birthday.

Following the visit, a group of officers made a promise to mentor him. Since then, Andre's outlook on life has transformed. His mother shared his story with us and its impact on his life and the Castillo family.

I want to recognize Andres for his courage, the school community and police staff that rallied around him.

Andres is a shining example of how strong relationships between the police department and our community reflects our core values.

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First responders are the foundation of our city, as safety is a vital component of our community. When we think of firefighters, we have the iconic image of responding to fires, automobile accidents, and medical emergencies. It takes a special kind of person to become a firefighter. Being a firefighter means more than just battling blazes. They save lives.

Last year, our Perth Amboy Fire Department responded to 2,232 incidents, including 183 fires. With God's grace, there were no fire fatalities for the 3rd consecutive year. This is a proven result of our three top priorities.

- First is fire safety, education and fire prevention, where education and enforcement work together to reduce the risk of fires from ever happening, including cross-training staff as fire inspectors.
- The second is to make sure all properties have working smoke alarms,
- And the third is rapid department response from our dedicated staff.

We also held the 100th-anniversary memorial ceremony for the 1921 train accident that killed 9 Perth Amboy Firefighters, the single most significant loss in New Jersey's history at a single incident.

A plaque was dedicated by the Middlesex County Commissioners that will be installed near the crash site. And a second memorial plaque will be installed in the Perth Amboy Train Station once renovations are completed.

Our investment in public safety continues with the promotion of members of the Police and Fire Departments to fill existing vacancies in the ranks of the Departments. Congratulations to all, and thank you:

- Police
- Auxiliary Police
- Fire
- our Fire Volunteers

for your life saving service to the City of Perth Amboy.

As our City continues to move towards a brighter future, we must pay close attention to necessary improvements to our City's infrastructure. That includes our water and sewer infrastructure, streets, and parks.

We have made investments in each department by streamlining our processes, incorporating tracking key performance indicators, and improving our customer service.

For example, we have increased Code enforcement Departments' capacity and abilities with the following improvements:

- Hiring 2 new Code enforcement officers and a full-time plumbing inspector.
- We have increased our use of Spatial Data Logic (SDL) technology with many staff members having gone through training to process and view inspections, violations, and respond to concerns.
- In addition, Perth Amboy residents will be able to submit permit applications, make inspection requests and address concerns online.

Have any of you seen the app? If you haven't - get SDL Citizen by downloading the mobile app.

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Thank you to our Code enforcement Director Irving Lozada, and our Administrative Analyst, Joel Rosa, for coordinating efforts with the SDL team and our city staff.

In keeping with my pledge to improve our city's beauty, I created the Anti-Graffiti and Vandalism Taskforce, made of various city staff and community volunteers to oversee the enforcement of clean-ups and education efforts regarding graffiti.

We also have expanded city routes for trash collection with automated vehicles and were awarded two ELECTRIC-POWERED sanitation trucks to expand our fleet while minimizing our carbon footprint.

Our physical improvements are seen throughout the city and in our highlights, including the LED lighting, benches and trees and the reactivation of the Green Team. We also want to thank NJDEP Commissioner Shawn LaTourette for stopping by to plant the state's first Salem Oak Tree seedling.

I greatly appreciate our DPW staff's daily commitment to providing top of the line services to our residents under the direction of Interim Director, Matthew Nieves. Thank you.

The global pandemic has underscored that close-to-home parks are crucial to a community's quality of life. During the crisis, people have turned to our parks like never before—for fresh air, exercise, meditation, and a sense of peace. Understanding the need for public open space for our children, families, athletic leagues, and visitors, we made a commitment to updating our parks leading to a year of accomplishments.

- First was the fencing installed at Washington Park made possible through the advocacy of our District 19 legislative partners. We also re-activated the park with free WIFI.
- Another success was the long-awaited groundbreaking last summer for the future 2nd Street Park. It was an honor to be joined by Korean War Veteran PFC Ervin Machado at the park's dedication as Borinqueneer Park after the 65th Army Infantry. Thank you Sam Delgado for the inspiration for the park's name.
 - This new park will create opportunities for programming and activities for the entire community and restore part of the City's natural coastline. It will be enhanced with cutting-edge technology to help promote the health and safety of all of its users.
- We also continue to honor our history with the newest County Park in honor of Thomas Mundy Peterson.
 - It includes a synthetic turf multi-use fields to host soccer, football, softball and baseball; and a stunning waterfront walkway.
- We also partnered with AARP and FitLot to build an outdoor fitness station at Dalton Park.

Perth Amboy will also be making necessary updates to the Veterans Youth Memorial Complex, the city's largest park. Since its initial build, this will be the first time; the park will see significant field and tech improvements with an investment of over \$5.5 million dollars. Combining modern technology with the persistent need for open space, these enhancements will revitalize the park experience.

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We had many celebrations last year with groundbreaking and dedications. Added to the list was the naming of Washington Park Basketball Courts after Brian Taylor, a local legend and former professional basketball player with the Former New Jersey Nets, whom I had the honor to present with my very first key to the city.

I want to thank our Office of Recreation for their responsive and creative ideas in park planning and recreational programming.

I'd also like to thank the local business community for sponsoring our recreational leagues, programs, events and meals. Many of our local restaurants and businesses such as ETC Management, Target, Home Depot, Dunkin Donuts, and Domino's Pizza play a vital role in supporting our city. I want to personally recognize Syed Zaidi, owner of Perth Amboy Dominos Pizza, for being the highest revenue generating franchise location in Central Jersey.

As a former student-athlete, sports have had a tremendous impact on my life, creating lifelong lessons that I carry with me.

On May 23rd, the Perth Amboy Soccer Club, U15 Wildcats, won the New Jersey Presidents Club Championship. As a result of winning the New Jersey Cup, the team went on to win the United States Youth Soccer - Eastern Regional Championship. This team has captured the hearts and minds of our city by putting Perth Amboy Soccer on a national stage. Their efforts have brought our community closer together through this amazing sport. We are grateful to the parents, coaches, and volunteers for supporting the team and allowing them to represent Perth Amboy with honor and humility.

We are so proud of our student-athletes. Join me with a round of applause for the Wildcats as the United States Youth Soccer Eastern Presidential Cup Champions and finalist of the National President's Cup

Today, another student-athlete, Ahsia Torres, 107lb wrestler dominated her weight class with an undefeated record of 18 and 0, and became champion for both the Greater Middlesex Conference and the New Jersey State Interscholastic Athletic Association. Ahsia Torres is the second state wrestling champion in the City's history and the first female to accomplish this feat. And this weekend she became Amboy's 1st High School All American after placing 5th in the Nation.

Please join me in congratulating Ahsia as NJ.com's Girls Wrestler of the Year.

There is a saying that there is nothing stronger than the heart of a volunteer, and that holds true to board appointments. I want to express my gratitude to the individuals on our boards for volunteering their time to improving our city.

Thank you to all board members serving our Library, Planning, Zoning, Redevelopment Agency, Housing Authority, BID, Green Team, Rent Control Board, Historic Preservation Commission, and Arts Council for their time and service to our city.

We continue to invest in our city, including our history. It is essential to learn from it and examine the past to better the future. Our city tells a story of many lifetimes and generations, lasting far longer than you and I. I want thank, City Historian, John Dyke for telling our stories.

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Last year, the city unveiled the newest historical marker acknowledging Perth Amboy, as one of 55 documented U.S. Middle Passage arrival sites. I want to thank all involved, including our residents, for securing the marking and educating the community about our past and promoting a more inclusive Perth Amboy.

I also want to congratulate the members of the Proprietary House, for not only their commitment to maintaining its history but also being a 2021 Historic Preservation Award winner from Preservation NJ.

My vision is to revive our local history to a national platform and it is exciting to announce the City of Perth Amboy will be part of the celebration for the 250th anniversary of the United States to take place in 2026.

By preserving our history, embracing our future and celebrating the fabric of our diverse community we provide the finest programming and resources to our residents through our Department of Human Services.

Thank you to the Office of Vital Statistics, the Office of Recreation and the Office of Aging for providing programming that builds a stronger, healthier and happier Perth Amboy. I'd like to recognize some of our senior friends who are with us this evening.

In the coming weeks, I will be announcing the activation of the Mayor's Advisory Board, the Mayor's Wellness Campaign and Youth Advisory Council to create community-based, supportive, and people-centric initiatives allowing future leaders the ability to mobilize and spearhead change.

We continue to be a place where people come to try new ideas. Our predecessors invested in Perth Amboy, and as such, we must continue investing in our existing assets, maximizing their potential, and investing in our youth.

The times we live in are truly extraordinary, and now, more than ever, our future rests on the talents, ideas, and ambition of our next generation of leaders.

Our educational institutions provide the foundation for us to thrive.

- Middlesex College, my alma mater
- Our Perth Amboy Public Schools,
- Middlesex County Vocational and Technical High School
- the Academy for Urban Leadership,
- Middlesex County STEM Academy,
- Perth Amboy Catholic Schools and
- Ukrainian Assumption Catholic School

I would like to thank their staff and board members for their time and commitment to our youth.

Revitalizing our library operations to meet the needs of the 21st century continues to be my priority as we work towards becoming a hub to connect people to people and people to information. As such, Perth Amboy was awarded \$1.5 million dollars by Congressman Pallone. Through our continued partnerships and working relationships we were able to secure these much needed funds to rehab the historic Perth Amboy Public Library, built-in 1903, with renovations and upgrades to meet our current needs.

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In addition, to our library renovations, our 2022 budget also outlined specific capital improvement investments upwards of \$1.8 Million to strengthen our water infrastructure. With these investments, I uphold my commitment to provide the very best that we have to offer our residents and business owners.

We look forward to the announcement of Perth Amboy's allocation from the Infrastructure Bill that will assist us with making our water cleaner and safer.

I want to personally thank Congressman Pallone for his advocacy for the State of New Jersey, our City, our library and our water infrastructure.

Over the past year, we've come a long way in working towards innovation, transformation, and accomplishing our goals illustrated through our city highlights in 2021. While there are still many challenges, I am proud of what we have accomplished together to position Perth Amboy for a better and brighter future.

Being mayor comes with many personal sacrifices, and I want to thank my family and friends for their support.

Quiero agradecer a mis padres, Jorge y Gladys, por su apoyo incondicional. Los quiero mucho.

And to one of greatest gifts in my life, my wife, Wendy. I thank God every day for giving me such a loving, thoughtful, kind, and compassionate wife. I would not be the husband and father to our beautiful children, Adam and Audrey, that I am today without your loving support and encouragement. I love you.

I am also privileged to have my office staff dedicated to their work. They genuinely care about what they do. This is an exceptional team, and I am very fortunate to have them working for our city. Thank you Lisett, Isamar and Myrna for making my days easier. I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the creative and forward thinking ideas of our Office of Information Technology and our Audio/Visual Team.

Our city is no stranger to adversity. And our resilience has prevailed once again.

We hold tremendous promise and opportunity for the City of Perth Amboy and all who live here.

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An actual test of what our city will accomplish is still ahead and I will not be able to accomplish anything significant alone.

- Together, we put this pandemic behind us.
 - Together, we ensure a safe community for everyone.
 - Together, we embark on a journey to revitalize our historic community with innovation and technology.
 - Together, we create more vibrant open spaces.
 - Together, we build an inclusive economy with access to opportunity and shared growth for our businesses.
 - Together, we create sustainable infrastructure investments.
 - Together, we meet the challenge of this moment and make our city stronger and healthier AND
- Together we all RISE!

The commitment and significant contributions of our city employees should consistently be recognized. I'm grateful for your unrelenting support and dedication to serving our great residents. I look forward to working together to ensure Perth Amboy is a welcoming and a well-maintained city, where streets and parks are beautiful, public safety is upheld, tourism boosts our economy, businesses thrive, and innovation becomes a driving force to prosperity.

As Henry Ford stated. Coming together is a beginning; keeping together is progress; working together is a success. Join me to build a better and brighter future for Perth Amboy – TOGETHER!

Thank you all for coming, God bless you all- Que Dios me lo Bendigas a todos.