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**Mayor Ras J. Baraka's 2024
State of the City Address**

Remarks as prepared for delivery on Tuesday, March 12, 2024

Madam President McIver, Municipal Council, dignitaries, elected officials, Mayors, Clergy, and fellow Newarkers. A decade ago, I sat in the Council Chambers representing the South Ward. I remember clearly the evening that I announced at the meeting that I would be running for Mayor of this great city. I wasn't particularly sure why I announced there and not even my family knew that this was going to happen.

I felt it was the right thing to do at the right time. Not for ambition, because my ambitions have always been big enough to include other people, and not because I planned to be the Mayor. In fact, I thought I could be the Councilman for many years to come; after all, it was just my first term. I was the Principal of Central High School then. I remember kids shedding tears because they knew this was the end of my journey there.

I was torn because I loved that place and I transformed lives there and enjoyed being the Councilman of the Ward I was raised in, but this was necessary, tugging

at me even. I did this with a sense of clarity and urgency, against all odds, even my own self-doubt.

But, this was my David moment – just a kid from Clinton Avenue and 10th Street. Amiri and Amina’s son, an activist, a poet, a teacher with nothing in his hands but a rock and a sling shot. Even my father would say to me in his home at breakfast that this was risky, but all of our lives we have always been faced with insurmountable odds, difficult terrain, finding our way through the wilderness.

We made it here to this place, Newark, on trains and buses or any way we could escape the horror, with food packed in shoeboxes and brown bags and everything we owned, falling out of our pockets.

In fact, the Promised Land has always been on the other side of the desert. What is ours has always sat neatly at the center of the storm behind huge walls, obscured by giants. It’s only when we face Goliath that our circumstances begin to change. We can’t miss our David moment out of fear and trepidation. The irony is I learned to take risks from watching them and listening to the stories my mother told.

They prepared me for this moment, by teaching me to open my mouth when others keep theirs shut, to love yourself and take care of your community even when it seems impossible. To read and to study so that when you opened your mouth you knew what you were saying, or no investigation, no right to speak, and to keep fighting, even if you stumble. Because to stumble is just to move forward faster.

So I got in the race! They said I would never be able to get out of the South Ward, or get anyone else to vote for me, that we couldn’t raise the money, and that I

wasn't prepared to be the Mayor – in fact that if I won the city would be overrun with crime and businesses would leave and development would suffer.

But look at us now. Look at us now! They were so wrong. Not because they underestimated me, but they underestimated you. And they underestimated God.

We were not overrun with crime, it has consistently dropped to lowest it's been in 60 years. And we do this without violating people's constitutional rights. We increased police productivity even with body cameras on all of our officers. We have less complaints against our police and we have removed more guns off the street. We have a consent decree, a civilian review board, and have redirected money to create the Office of Violence Prevention and Trauma Recovery, with social workers in every precinct, and we still have the finest, most productive outstanding men and women on our police force and in the entire state.

The budget didn't fall apart. We walked in with a \$93 million deficit and more than 160 police officers laid off and furloughs on city workers. We reversed all of that and our credit ratings have improved since then. Businesses did not leave the city and development has not ceased – take a look at what is happening in Newark. We have billions of dollars worth of development that has happened and that is happening now.

We are proving here in our city that we can do good and do well at the same time. That Progressive is not a bad word or bad for the economy. We are proving that we can care about people. That we can fight for the undocumented to have driver licenses, the formerly incarcerated and 16-year-olds to vote, we can run a guaranteed income program, and give money to artists to beautify our city. We

can make developers build affordable housing and give houses to residents for \$1. We can build Hope Villages for residents without addresses, and get our youth to build homes in the neighborhoods they live in. We can empower the people of our city, one family at a time and still have a vibrant economy, a community that is not falling apart, and a place we call home! A strong city with strong families, with so much to offer.

You just saw the video. How beautiful is our city, despite the pundits, those that cry from outside the arena, the journalists that insist on our misery. Those whose power comes from our demise. They are all wrong!

Our city is incredible, its landscape amazing, opportunity growing, and people moving in, our culture diverse and so robust you can feel it. Our invaluable strength is in our ability to face challenges head-on and to make progress anyway.

That's how we came back from a deadly pandemic, a grave water crisis, frightening spikes in violence, and economic hardships we face daily – by God's grace we always stand tall and I couldn't be more confident that our city is on good footing and its future is bright.

We have come such a long way, an old and proud city. We are proud of the fact that we have constructed housing in every ward. In fact, we have awarded \$35 million to affordable housing projects in every ward. We have 47 units completed or under construction now in the West Ward Model Neighborhood Initiative.

Also, Envy at 58-84 Norfolk Street, which boasts a roof deck, Zen Garden, movie screening, and pet washing station. Latana project – two buildings, 100 percent affordable. 109 Broad and 130 North 11th Street with a fitness center, community room, and landscaped terrace and onsite electric vehicle charging stations. 50

Sussex Ave, 203 units almost done, 39 Madison Avenue, more than 80 units. 556 Market Street adds 52 units to Newark's Ironbound.

And we are even more proud of the expansion of the Newark Museum, which includes the already restored Ballantine House, will also entail a 4.5 acre cultural park, a \$5 million learning and Engagement Arts Center, and will include 250 market-rate and affordable units. And my favorite, a landscaped Art and Sculpture garden with a glass house gallery.

Then there is the expansion of New Jersey Performing Arts Center, that has already received its state and local approvals. 350 residential units and more than 9,000 square feet of commercial space. There will also be 13,300 square feet of retail space and a new Cooperman family community center for the arts and education. This is a brand new campus that will include outdoor meeting spaces and a four season urban public park

And finally, rounding off the new Arts and Education district is the Mulberry Commons Bridge. We took exponential steps in ensuring the creation of our very own walking bridge, like the High Line in New York City, that will begin at Mulberry Commons and land in the Ironbound.

But I mentioned this last year – what is important now is that we have begun the visioning and discussions for the area around the park that was triggered in our land swaps to create the park. This will reimagine the entire downtown and begin to move the center of gravity to Mulberry Street and beyond.

This is a massive project that includes seven sites. 1 million, 315 thousand square feet of commercial space and 12 million, 140 thousand square feet of residential that will also include affordable housing, a hotel, and parking. This is one of the

biggest projects the city has seen in decades. We are also proud to have partnered with Prudential Financial to help co-lead us on the visioning and planning of this major transformative addition to our Arts and Education District. And while I'm speaking of partners, I would remiss not to thank Audible, Don Katz, and especially Aisha Glover on the work they continue to do with and for our city.

The Business Attraction program helped to attract new retail and tech startups to our city – all led by women of color! Gymlbe, Fitnesscity, Newark Culture Club, Co Census and Boulevard Bistro are all coming to add more color around Harriett Tubman Square. We also collectively invested in the expansion of Equal Space, a 50,000 square foot co-working space and hub catering to multi-cultural founders. And that's not all.

We have literally welcomed more than 1,000 new businesses to our city including Deltas, Tin June, Serafina, Swahili Village, NJTV's new studio, the new Prudential tower, Nike, and now Burlington. Mars Wrigley headquarters, McKenzie global consulting firm, and HAX, a major tech startup development firm. The Geraldine Dodge Foundation moved its headquarters here. There are four new hotels, Kinjo Japanese's cuisine on Washington Street, Salad House, Chip City, Uncle Willies, Sihana Café, our friends at Tainos and everything Adenah Bayoh is doing. Katherine's Brewery, Cold Stone, and Envy restaurant bordering the Central and North Ward.

Take a drive in the South Ward – you will see the expansion of Newark Beth Israel and Plants and Poets Café on Clinton Avenue. The long-abandoned old bank that we converted to artists housing. And soon to come, Lionsgate Studios! And those are just a few.

We have so much to be proud of. Not just me – all of us. Because when I became Mayor, you became Mayor! I'm proud to represent Newark. I'm proud to have been your Mayor for the last 10 years. We have done so much in this past decade. And we have helped our neighbors contribute to this city's growth. Let me introduce you to a few.

She couldn't join us tonight but, in November of 2023 right before Thanksgiving, Christian Miller, through our Section 8 conversion program, purchased a home renovated by the Invest Newark Land Bank, with construction done by YouthBuild. The only land bank in the state – still. She became the seventh Newark resident to convert their Section 8 voucher into a mortgage. The New York Giants and Bobs Discount Furniture teamed up with us to completely furnish Mrs. Miller's home so that she could enjoy the holidays. This section 8 conversion program has been so successful that the state is now pushing to have a statewide program that allows vouchers to be used to pay mortgages. We have so much to be proud about in Newark!

Joining us tonight is Tiye Pettaway, who graduated from Weequahic High School and employed by Newark Public Schools as a security guard. She looked for affordable housing and because of our Inclusionary Zoning set aside law, has now moved in the beautiful ICONIQ residences on McCarter Highway, with a roof top bar and a pool.

And our Inclusionary Zoning Ordinance is working, which is why the state has now mandated all of its programs also have a 20 percent set aside for affordable housing. We have so much to be proud about in Newark!

Teresa Banks, from Stephen Crane Elderly, a Newark Housing Authority complex in the North Ward. Stephen Crane was one of the first buildings we extended Newark Fiber to – the city’s own fiber network – Newark Fiber was installed with the help of Invest Newark.

Hilda Mera was born in Ecuador and came here at the age of 20. She has been the co-owner and CEO of S&A Auto Repair since 2013. This is a family-owned business that went through the Invest Newark business development classes and now has shops in Newark and Kearny.

We have Dashawn Brown, who graduated from the National Career Institute’s electrical assistant and HVAC program. But before that, he was a participant in our Safe Summer Academy program for the past three years. Despite facing challenges including arrest and a gunshot incident, he completed the program with us and retained employment with the City as an electrical assistant. With immense pride, I want to acknowledge Dashawn for his determination to finish his education and maintain full time employment.

Samyah Kinchen, a participant in our Guaranteed Education pilot program, will be the first in her family to earn a college degree. She grew up in Newark’s South Ward, raised in a single-family household by her mother. She graduated from Malcolm X Shabazz high School and was not certain about her ability to access college. Now, because of our program, she is attending the College of Saint Elizabeth, for free! She wants to obtain a Bachelor’s Degree in Psychology.

We promised to bring down crime and make our city safer, and we have. Keeping our community safe has been my top priority. This year we hired an additional 61 police officers and opened a full service police precinct in the Arts and Education

District as people are beginning to live downtown. We ended the year last year down in every category except auto-theft with a close out rate of 79 percent for homicides – meaning if you commit violent crimes in our city, the probability that you will get caught is very high! I would like the Police Brass to stand, the Public Safety Director, Fritz Fragé, Chief Miranda, and the entire Public Safety team. This is the best police force in this state. But they don't do this work alone. The Office of Violence Prevention and Trauma Recovery, the Brick City Peace Collective, and all of our partners are doing lifesaving work in our city. We were proud to see Deputy Mayor Lakeesha Eure graduate from the University of Chicago Community Violence Leadership Academy at the White House in front of Vice President Kamala Harris with her colleagues from across the country, that have embarked on this work. Many of them have come here to Newark first to follow our lead.

This year we made considerable investments in our community based violence intervention partners, which resulted in a 50 percent increase in mediations of conflicts, along with therapeutic services, and crisis intervention. We tripled the number of community engagement events across the city and increased our high-risk intervention capacity by investing in nine separate partners and we are doing the same around domestic violence. We now have hospital-based intervention at both University Hospital and Beth Israel. This is very real work. Everyone that is doing this work please stand.

From Rutgers University to One Hood, from University Hospital to Push and the HUBB. From Newark Community Street Team to New Direction. While some still try to find ways to undermine or belittle this work, the Federal Government has opened their Office of Violence Prevention and so has the state following our

achievements. We are invited around the country to help other cities create what we are doing here. We are leading the way in Newark and we have so much to be proud of.

We have begun renovations on the firehouses, starting with the roofs and are planning to build a new downtown fire house. As well as stand up a specialized unit in direct response to our brothers we lost tragically at the port fire.

Let's take a moment of silence for Captains Acabou and Brooks. We will never forget your sacrifice. We will never forget your names. And our department, our city, our lives, will forever be changed because of your service.

We are thankful for the work Senator Timberlake is doing to create state legislation around fire safety and find resources both at the state and federal level so that we will never have what happened on that dreadful evening ever happen again.

We have put in the largest fire class in the history of this division, though there is so much work still to be done. I am asking the Vulcans, the Fire Union, rank and file, officers, and the Public Safety Director to meet and come up with a plan and a strategy to make sure what we did in the Police Division happens in the Fire Division – that we make sure the division and our recruits are as diverse as our city is. Whatever we need to do to ensure equity in hiring and retaining women, people of color, and Newark residents we must do now!

And if you have not seen the William Mobile Ashby Community Care and Training Center you need to go by and look at it. This is a community-based training facility named after the first African American Social Worker in the state of New Jersey. He was the Founder of the Newark Urban League, and a founder of the United

Way of Greater Newark. He is also one of 14 founders of Alpha Alpha Lambda Chapter of A Phi A. But here in this magnificent community space, we will train social workers, our outreach teams, hold Safe Summer Academy for youth, Doula Training, Workforce, and GED training. And we will train Newark Police and Fire recruits to join some of the finest and bravest men and women in this state.

We have also been working tirelessly on equity and doing our part in trying to help address the enormous wealth gap in this state by creating financial empowerment. Trying to build rafts so our people won't drown from the increased wealth becoming more concentrated in a few people's hands making it difficult to live in this state.

We completed our second year of the guaranteed income pilot that put money in 430 people's hands and pumping over \$5 million into our local economy. We have put people in homes through Section 8 and dollar homes built by local minority developers, where seven families have been awarded homes already for \$1. On top of that, our Live Newark program offers first-time homebuyers \$20,000 towards closing costs and the Home Façade Improvement Program offers \$40,000 toward exterior home repairs.

We do this not because we wanted to create a gimmick for a news story, but out of necessity. The average cost of a home is \$350,000 in our city and the average income is around \$35,000.

So we do real work to get in the way of real problems. Our Land Bank, the only one in the state, has put 52 properties back into productive use and on our tax rolls. Between 2022 and 2023 they approved over \$4 million in loans to small businesses in our city helping them grow and expand. We are also super-proud of

our First Lady Linda Baraka for partnering with dfree Financial Freedom Movement, as well as Audible, Prudential and others to target the women in our community and get them on the road to financial empowerment. We know if you feed a man, you take care of an individual, but if you feed a woman, you take care of a family.

And as housing or the lack of continues to be a problem for us here in the City of Newark and the state, even people that hold Section 8 vouchers are having trouble finding housing. There are about 4,000 people statewide that have a voucher and cannot find placement. Either because of the lack of available units, or discrimination against those that have these vouchers, which is against the law.

We will be working hard to identify landlords that violate this law and to find places for our residents to live. We also are making a pledge to start and/or finish construction on at least 1,000 units of affordable housing this year, and put a serious focus on those Newark residents that hold vouchers. This is not impossible, as 827 units of affordable housing has already been approved this year. If you are a landlord, a developer, or a homeowner, we need you to partner with us and help us prevent people from being homeless.

And as the Municipal Council begins to figure out how to reinstate the five year tax abatement for small owner occupied developers, I want them to consider two years of an abatement on new or substantially rehabilitated construction to those that take residents into their homes that hold a Section 8 voucher.

Before 2016, less than 10% of the city's residential units had been registered. We have increased that percentage to 45 percent registering at least 50,000 additional units. We have passed a local law that allows us to ensure that Newark

residents are getting the opportunity to move in first to take advantage of our stronger Inclusionary Zoning Ordinance that calls for 20 percent set aside of affordable units. And again, the state has adopted that policy as well.

In the innovation and tech space, we created the “Newark Builds Program” thanks to a federal grant. This provides our residents with training for in-demand careers in virtual reality, sustainable offshore wind energy construction, which by the way we agree with here in Newark – clean energy and growing jobs – it’s an investment in our future; careers in drone piloting and fiber optics development. We are also creating a registry of Newarkers credentialed in these skilled trades to make it easier for employers to find them right here in our city.

In 2023 Invest Newark and the Office of Information Technology led an effort to expand internet access in our city, which to date has resulted in 700 public housing units having access to Newark Fiber. It’s reliable and affordable. With the help of federal funding, Invest Newark helped 37,000 households sign up and reduce their internet costs monthly to about \$30, which adds up to over \$1 million of savings per month to our residents.

We have expanded Wi-Fi to Harriet Tubman Square and Halsey Street and more than a dozen new businesses signed up for Newark Fiber. This has resulted in Newark being named the National Digital Inclusion Trailblazer by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration. When everyone has access to high-speed quality internet, everyone has a chance to succeed. For work, for school, job search, personal development and more, this work that has been done by Invest Newark helps us provide opportunity and access to those that may not have had it. This is work that we should be proud of.

Paul Robeson said, “artists are the gatekeepers of truth. We are civilization’s radical voice.” Albert Einstein said, “true intelligence is not determined by knowledge but by imagination.” John Coltrane, in an interview, said he wanted to be a force for good. I know that there are forces that bring misery to the world but I want to be the opposite force...and Amiri Baraka wrote the one that sticks with me forever: “that the noblest function of art is to oppose what is ugly.”

When I became Mayor, we immediately began to uplift the artists in our community. We began with one of the largest murals in the state on McCarter Highway. We began transforming our neighborhoods across the city, embracing our diversity and culture. Last year alone, our Division of Arts and Cultural Affairs helped develop and facilitate more than a dozen murals. We hosted a poetry and spoken word event in the City Hall Rotunda by Kween Moore. We erected the Harriet Tubman monument and were overwhelmed with joy, watching our children learn and play around that monument at our Tots for Tubman program.

As the world denies our history in Newark, we wrap ourselves in it to protect us and inspire us to make the world into the place we imagine and can be proud of. We stood Kenneth Gibson up on the steps of City Hall so everyone can greet our story on the way and never forget that the arc of history will always bend toward justice.

We developed the Creative Catalyst Fund, which awarded 402 grants of more than \$2 million to local artists, which began during the pandemic to help them stay afloat, but we kept it going because we know how important it is for our city’s vitality and economic growth.

We have finally begun the restoration of Newark Symphony Hall in our effort to preserve its legacy and glory. The old Mosque Theater with the restoration beginning with renovation of the Terrace Ballroom. And when you get a chance, walk down Treat Place and see what art can do for life and love and empowerment. Go by the Source of Knowledge Bookstore, grab something to eat and look at the incredible mural that was created by an international artist from Ghana visiting our city.

And let us not forget about those lead service lines! The City of Newark developed and oversaw the largest lead service line replacement program in the country that removed lead in pipes faster than anyone has ever done. And yes, there has been talk to try to besmirch or muddy that accomplishment with the latest news that a vendor may not have done their job correctly. And if they did not, they will be held accountable, but I am here to say that we have had at least eight consecutive periods with no lead exceedance since December 2019.

We are still going strong. We protected our residents. And the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection has been with us every step of the way, determining that Newark has met and even exceeded its goals and directed more than 1,000 customers to receive funding from the Department of Community Affairs to assist with payments on their balances.

Listen, I'm here to tell you that we have a lot to be proud of – that despite this setback our water is safe and we still had the best damn lead replacement program in the country!

Last year, we released and strategic plan with the goal of ending homelessness in our city. As a result of our collective efforts, along with our partners and our

incredible homeless outreach team, we saw a 57 percent decrease in the city's unsheltered population. Meaning we are working to get people off of our streets. We have more work to do to see these folks transition into permanent housing. Which is why we need more housing not just in Newark, but around the state.

We opened our second hope Village, "Come as you are," and are working on our third, "Resilient Hope." And the first Hope Village has seen at least 21 percent of its residents move into permanent housing.

But we know this is simply not enough. We acquired a \$2.9 million grant to help with mental health emergencies and crisis intervention. We are also developing the first-of-its-kind texting service to enable members of the public to alert our street outreach team of people in need of shelter or help. Additionally, we are using money from our Opioid settlement to begin to supplement our outreach team with individuals that will target drug addiction and abuse.

We have so much further to go around homelessness in our city but we certainly should be proud of the work that Luis Ulerio, the Commissioners, our partners, and the outreach team has done to bring us closer to resolving homelessness in our city. In fact, if every municipality and every county did the work this team is doing, the state would be closer to becoming a national example.

We should also be proud of our new Re-engagement Center for Youth. In partnership with Newark Public Schools, we will engage our young people that are not enrolled in any school that are coming home from incarceration or that are aged out. We will provide school placement, academic enrichment and support, mentoring, mental health and substance abuse screenings, support, job readiness and life skills programming, and more. We are also targeting young

people on long-term suspensions or that will be away from school to ensure they are getting a structured learning plan and environment.

We want to connect our young people to better life outcomes before they connect with the streets. We want them to find a place with us instead of us pushing them to law enforcement.

And while we are talking about our youth. I was pleased and excited to hear President Biden talk about another of our strategies in his State of the Union Address – our efforts to get our children to read on grade level by the third grade.

We organized a Cradle Project Conference led by Dr. Sharnee Brown, to illuminate the urgency of quality medical delivery systems to promote positive health outcomes for expectant mothers and promote the power of early literacy.

Tonight, I'm asking public and charter school leaders to come together now and create one student enrollment system-our parents are asking for it. And, every school in this city has to take their fair share of students with special or different needs.

We understand that women have been and are the primary health givers and care takers of our country and its families and if we don't take care of our women, then we will be forever doomed to poor outcomes. We must provide proper maternity care for all, regardless of race and financial status. Pay them equally for the work they do. Provide resources for early childcare and expanded opportunities for training and education. If we want to take care of our families then we must lift the status of women in our community.

We also developed a 10-point literacy strategy for all stakeholders to help our kids catch up after the pandemic and one of the points on our list is High Dosage

Tutoring, which is exactly what the President spoke on. Our City is moving in the right direction and have so much to be proud of.

We are continuously working to improve our resident's access to medical care across the city and improve the health outcomes for our families. We know firsthand how health and environmental disparities reduce the quality of our lives and worsen our life expectancy. In fact, in just eight miles, there is a 14-year gap of life expectancy between Newark and cities like Livingston.

In that vein, we plan to plant 300 trees this year with the first 100 to be planted by April. This will help us improve our tree canopy and have a direct effect on the rates of asthma in our children and the heat island index that makes this city at least 10 degrees hotter than most. It will assist us with flooding, beautify, and clean the air throughout our neighborhoods.

Before I go on, I want to tell Ketlen Alsbrook to stand. She has been one of the best Health Directors we have seen in a long time. Dedicated to this city and its families. Since she has been with us we have seen a 43 percent increase in children being screened for lead and a 52 percent decrease in lead related cases. A 32 percent increase in families receiving food assistance, breast-feeding support, and nutritional counseling. And a 193 percent increase in children receiving immunization services.

We purchased three state of the art medical mobile units partnering with community-based organizations to target underserved communities and provide them with essential medical and mental health services. We opened a Health Clinic of our own next to Bradley Court Housing facility inside of Speedway Avenue School for residents of that community and the surrounding area. We

have done all of this and we are not done yet. There is so much more to be proud of.

I can't end this tonight without talking about our 360 Master Plan and the subsequent Zoning Ordinance changes that followed. Despite the controversy it may have caused for some or click bait for a few journalists, I am deeply proud of what we accomplished. We earned an award for our ability to get this done with maximum community input in the middle of Covid, with some 10,000 resident touch points.

John F. Kennedy said in a speech at Rice University, "This country was not built by those who waited, that rested, that wished to look behind them." Our job is to prepare for our future, not live comfortably in the past. We have new challenges, new problems, and some intractable ones that we have not been able to even out. We must accept discomfort as the price we pay for new growth, for equity and fair treatment, for a city that takes care of everyone not just those that benefit for the way things have been. In fact, for many it's the way things have been that has hindered their ability to live. It was a necessity for us to **create** density, as the census has proven that our city is growing. We need more walking traffic on our corridors so we can repair our neighborhoods and capture the tens of millions of dollars that leak out of our community yearly.

We must give mid-size and small developers that are overwhelmingly Black and Brown and local, an opportunity to compete to build infill housing, to put abandoned properties back on our tax rolls, to create more affordability and home ownership, and to attack this wealth gap at the same time from multiple directions. We have to allow housing to go up downtown to create more density

as the business community will never be same after COVID. The foot-traffic has subsided considerably. So it is critically imperative to get more people living downtown to grow that community and keep our businesses alive.

We are happy that Governor Murphy signed state legislation that will allow us to even the playing field on liquor licenses. This will help us continue building the nightlife in Newark that we need desperately on our march to becoming a 24-hour destination city. During the pandemic, we saw our unemployment rate reach 25 percent and had to help thousands of residents with back rent and food assistance. People lost jobs and had to close brick and mortar business and were penalized for trying to make money in their home as they had no choice, so we made it okay for you to do taxes out of your home, to do hair, to teach instrumental lessons, to bake cakes, and so on.

Why? Because our economy is changing rapidly and the cost of living in our state is too high, and Newark is not too far behind. We must do everything in our power to keep people afloat, to help them pay their bills and feed their families. It is not only our duty as good neighbors, but it is the smart thing to do economically and socially.

As our City grows, we also required developers to add green roofs and expand our water and sewer infrastructure to take into account flooding and usage, and we made it mandatory that they plant trees because climate change is real.

I was at the North to Shore announcement last week in Asbury Park and had a conversation with David Rodrigues, who is chiefly responsible for the acts that come into NJPAC and other venues in this area. He told me that they are successful because they skate to where the puck is going – not where it is.

Diversity is here to stay. Communities of color are growing in this city and in this state. This is a fact that can't be stopped even by the most conservative. So simple, but so profound.

And it's why NJPAC is experiencing incredible success and why the Prudential Arena is one of the top 10 arenas internationally, because they skate to where the puck is going. They are not stuck in old prejudices and segregated ideas. They understand the power of diversity and inclusion. They don't just focus on traditional audiences, they focus on Newark and all nationalities. I have been to Hockey games and HBCU classics at the arena. People sleep in tents for K-POP and line up on our streets for New Edition. I've seen Romeo Santos and Lauryn Hill, Wu-Tang Clan, and Elton John. NJPAC hosted Ledisi and the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra, a tribute to Miles Davis, the Trinity Irish Dance Company, MusiQ Soulchild, and John Mellencamp. This is who we are.

This ability to see our future with all of us in it, to use our right now to prepare for a more stable tomorrow. This is not just how we get to democracy—this is how we force America, our city, our state, to be its best self – it's actually the blueprint, not just for our survival, but for our sustainability and unprecedented growth.

Our imagination has to be bigger than our prejudices and our courage greater than our desire for comfort. Our problems are becoming more entangled than we ever imagined and President Biden was right, that we can't use old ideas to get where we need to go or put new wine in old skins.

You know, one out of every three people I meet in this state has a story they want to share with me about their childhood or their family's journey in Newark. So

many people have connections to this historic port city. Stories of struggle and perseverance, of family and big dreams. Some met those dreams and others are still trying to find their way.

I listen to people who use us as a scapegoat or talk about us like they don't know the heart of this place, the hardship, and the deep faith of so many that found their way here looking for opportunity and a fresh start. Or they can't see how far we have come and the tremendous strides we have made. Even if you don't agree with my politics, it's undeniable.

My family got off the train here some time ago, one or two stops from their planned destination because Newark sounds so much like New York. I was born soon after the Newark Rebellion. And lived it through the stories my mother told of my brother in her arms hiding upstairs as the police ran into our home, of my father's head split wide open by his classmate from Barringer High School that happened to become a police officer.

There is this picture of him chained to wheelchair in a hospital bleeding from the head. My mother was running through the streets, trying to find him amidst chaos and death. Prosecutors read his poems in court to falsely accuse him of starting riots. Our city has never really recovered from that summer. The occupation, the deaths, the destruction of property and infrastructure.

There was no Marshall Plan for us after. We survived with our wit and determination, our ingenuity, and our grit. We made it here as others left and took the tax base with them.

I applaud every mayor that came after the Rebellion, starting with Kenneth Allen Gibson, Sharpe James, Cory Booker, and Luis Quintana, to the present.

We had to do so much with so little and the strides we made have never been given its full due. We work because we must. Every day we wake up to turbulence, flying a plane through a storm, trying not to just pick up the garbage, but keep our children alive. We don't just have to deal with snow and potholes, but making sure our mothers don't die in the hospital giving birth and that families have access to food.

This is what we do out of necessity – not for title or ambition because if your ambition only includes you, it's short sighted anyway. Our ambition must be big enough to include us all. I don't come from a family of millionaires, nor am a part of a huge law firm. I didn't fight in any wars, or come from a legacy of politicians. I'm just a kid from Newark, who wrote poetry at 16 and kept it in his back pocket as proof that dreams come true and the devil is a liar. Who is thankful when guns were fired, it didn't hit me, or when the police rounded up my friends I was on my way to college.

I had friends that sacrificed for me and family that set me on the right path. I came home and ran for Mayor at 24 years old – 16 years before I won anything. I took the stairs here today. In fact the back stairs.

And I'm so proud of what we are accomplishing here in the city where I was born and raised.

We have so much to be proud of Newark. Don't listen to those that wake up to revise your history, to make you believe we are not on our way. Mercenaries whose job it is to get you off that wall. Stay on the wall, Newark and Hold the Line. Ask yourselves why some go to great lengths to convince us that we don't mean much in Newark, or that we are not making progress, that we are not smart

enough or prepared. They attempt to isolate us into caricatures, then say we are lethargic, powerless, our voter turnout too low, as if voter turnout across the state is soaring. But they are going to find out soon how creative we are, how much power we wield in our hands, how strong our grandmother's prayers are, how much influence we have and how many family and friends we have in this state across nationalities from Cumberland County to Warren County. Our imagination is too big, and our conviction too wide.

I know they want you to believe that we are just thrown away rags and leftover cloths that no one has use for.

But there is a story I heard about a man named Jeremiah that spoke the truth and was lowered into a cistern because of it and sunk down in the mire. They thought he would perish there: no food, no water, and sink in his own self-loathing. But then there was an Ethiopian man with brown skin and curly hair that used his imagination and went and got the left overcloth – the rags they might have been thrown away and tied them together. He told Jeremiah, "Put these under his arms," used what others thought was trash, and pulled him out of this toilet, this cistern. You should be careful what you think is viable or what and who God chooses to use.

What we do in Newark is a labor of love. We are the forgotten stone that has now become the cornerstone. The stone the builders rejected is now that stone you need to stand on, the stone you depend on. The rooms you kept us out of, the tables you refuse to let us sit at, the dreams you called impossible, the hope you insisted was false.

I don't believe your stories. I never did. I never doubted the people here even in the most difficult moments. I believe in the best of us and I believe that whatever we do together can never be impossible. I know as we reimagine this city – I know we can reimagine this state. They say I'm too progressive, because here we want students to vote in school board elections or same-day voting. A Civilian Complaint Review Board and IDs for undocumented residents.

They want us to believe its extreme to make corporations pay their fair share to help shoulder the burden of the high expenses in this state. To pay more than what working families must pay. They want me to believe that child tax credits and baby bonds are not worth the outcome of lifting children out of hunger or subsidizing childcare for a struggling family. They want us to believe it's impossible to close the wealth gap or give all of our kids a quality education and get rid of zip codes as barriers. They think that equity and democracy are more expensive than segregation and poverty. They want us to think we are wrong to want our wages lifted and health care that doesn't make us homeless, especially when insurance companies made billions of dollars in record profit while families lost loved ones trapped in their homes during COVID. That it's unreasonable to want housing that we don't spend half our paychecks on or a tax code that's fair with no loopholes for the wealthy or live in an environment that is killing us slowly. They benefit from us being isolated and segregated by block and zip code and by race and religion. They want us to believe all of our problems are so different, but if you cant pay your rent on Court Street, the outcome is the same if you can't pay your mortgage in South Orange.

The good thing is that I know they are wrong. I've seen it here on our streets from young men caught up in the gang culture who thought their lives were over who are now traveling the country, saving lives and raising other young men out of death and destruction. I see it here on the faces of kids given a chance at college that were never on the honor roll, but are now in the honor society in college. I witnessed it in the tears of families that have been given keys to their new home after generations of public housing. I hear it in the voices of kids with humble beginnings coming home from Ivy League schools and HBCUs. I know it's possible, because I witness every day what we are doing with what's in our hands. I know what vision and imagination can do. AND I believe our collective imagination is robust enough and is durable enough to transform this state. And who better to lead a broad-based coalition across this state from every race and every nationality, every religion, gay and straight, city and suburbs, but a pilot from Newark who has dedicated his life to flying through storms. This is why I'm throwing my hat in the race for Governor of the State of New Jersey. History demands it and working people deserve it.

God Bless you all here tonight. God Bless The United States. God Bless the State of New Jersey. And God Bless the Proud and Great People of Newark!