



## Office of the Mayor

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### Transcript "Our Madison" Address by Mayor Satya Rhodes-Conway

Greetings, Madisonians, and thank you for joining me. I want to begin by acknowledging that we live on the ancestral lands of the great Ho Chunk Nation. I also want to express my deep gratitude for the privilege of serving as your Mayor. Little did I know what challenges this year would bring.

- I am humbled by the responsibility of leading in these difficult times. I would much prefer to be in the same room with you, but I respect and support the guidance from our public health officials to avoid large gatherings.

I am here today to tell you that your City is working hard for you - we are tackling challenges head on, and together I am confident we will emerge as a stronger, more resilient and more equitable City.

I am here today to ask you to be part of the solution.

Six months ago, our world changed. In late January, we heard about the first potential case in Dane County of the virus we've all come to know as COVID-19, and nothing has been normal since.

Trying to stay healthy and safe has changed everyday life in dramatic ways. How we interact with loved ones near and far, how we work, how we learn, how we celebrate and mourn – so many things are different now.

The economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic has hit our City hard. In April, the City's unemployment rate skyrocketed and is now more than double the average. Many of us worry about paying the bills, how we will feed our families, or pay the rent. Local businesses are struggling and don't know what the future will bring. And Madison's communities of color, at higher risk under normal conditions, have been disproportionately hit by both the health and economic impacts of the virus.

Then, two and half months ago, the world changed again. The murder of George Floyd by the Minneapolis Police Department, witnessed in horrible and vivid detail, put a bright spotlight on a pandemic that has afflicted this country for generations – the pandemic of systemic racism – and reignited urgent demands for racial justice.

I want to acknowledge the deep anger and pain that many in our community feel as a result of racism in all its insidious forms.

And so, today, facing a public health crisis of unprecedented proportions and a moral obligation to address racial injustice, history calls on us, all of us, to respond. To be part of the solution. That is why I wanted to talk directly to you today about these challenges and how we at the City are responding, and how we as a community can come together to begin to make our Madison a better place for all.

From the outset of the pandemic, we have followed the science-based guidance of our joint City-County public health department. We have implemented sometimes-difficult policies in order to help reduce the spread of infection and protect the public's health. We have asked a great deal from you.

We asked you to limit gathering sizes which put personal plans and treasured events on hold. We asked you to find and wear masks to protect yourselves and each other. We asked you to keep your physical distance from others. We asked employers to change the way they do business – by providing PPE, enabling telecommuting and retrofitting workplaces with Plexiglas barriers and more. We even asked you to keep your kids away from other kids, an almost impossible task!

While we asked you to stay home, City staff and other essential workers hit the streets. First responders, health care workers, grocery clerks, public works staff – all kept open lifelines to vital services. The City never paused in delivering clean water and taking away sewage, thanks to our dedicated public works crews. We never missed a beat on picking up garbage and recycling, thanks to our hard-working Streets Department. Street repairs, infrastructure construction, storm water projects and more slowed a little but kept going. Public workers have been an essential part of the solution.

The City and the Dane County Executive Joe Parisi collaborated on emergency food access, on getting more than 500 vulnerable and homeless people off the streets and into safer settings that allowed for physical distancing. We worked together with Governor Evers and the National Guard on a testing facility at Alliant Energy Center, which has now tested over 100,000 people.

Our hospitals gave their all, creating more critical care beds. Kevin Conroy and his team at Exact Sciences transformed their operations to produce millions of COVID-19 tests. Renee Moe and her colleagues at United Way quickly mobilized to organize volunteers and connect people to resources through its 211 system. The Latino Consortium for Action raised hundreds of thousands to support undocumented families, who were cruelly left out of the federal CARES Act. You stepped up to be part of the solution as well – making and donating masks, organizing food drives, and donating your time and resources in many ways.

There is no question that these actions, your actions and your individual sacrifices have made a difference. Area hospitals are full, but have not been overwhelmed, our death rate in Dane County is half of that of the state, and while case numbers are climbing in Wisconsin counties

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that have chosen not to adopt strong public health orders, that is not happening here – our curve is flattening again.

Thank you for your sacrifices, thank you for everything you have done – and will continue to do – to keep our community safe.

And we have much more work to do.

We have been closely tracking COVID-19 related health disparities. Both our Latinx community and our Black community are suffering rates of infection far higher than our white community. To better understand and address this, Public Health is working to expand testing in these communities. One strategy has been to bring testing to residents at places like Orchard Ridge United Church of Christ, the Boys and Girls Club, the Hmong Institute, the Villager Mall, and more. We are also working to connect families without insurance to health care services.

Since COVID-19 hit, we've held two successful elections, and are already preparing for November. It may seem like the Clerk's Office has performed miracles, in fact, our success was the product of very hard work. Informed by a thorough equity analysis of the April election, we identified safe, new polling places, initiated innovative curbside ballot drop-off and absentee voting practices, instituted other safety measures and processed tens of thousands of absentee ballots.

I secured a \$1.2 million dollar grant to help the City replicate this success in November, and we will really need your help to ensure we have enough poll workers and volunteers for what we hope will be a historic, high-turnout election. Please sign up to volunteer at: [cityofmadison.com/clerk](http://cityofmadison.com/clerk).

With MMSD's plans to start the year with virtual learning, we are working shoulder to shoulder with our new School Superintendent Dr. Carlton Jenkins to create childcare options for low-income families with elementary-aged students. We want to make sure that every child is educated and supported during this difficult time.

It takes all hands on deck to tackle these problems and I meet weekly with community leaders across our major institutions to do just that – we are all part of the solution.

Even as we took immediate action to respond to COVID-19, we recognized that the pandemic had the potential to bring on an unprecedented economic downturn.

We are beginning budget deliberations. Because of steep revenue losses due to the coronavirus, the City faces a \$20 million shortfall in our 2021 budget. We will not be able to do everything we want to do.

- Public Health will be a priority this year.
- Violence prevention will be a priority this year.
- Equitable economic recovery will be a priority this year.

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And we are still working on the priorities you elected me to focus on affordable housing, rapid transit, combatting climate change, and racial equity.

This won't be easy. We have to work smarter and more efficiently. We have to make difficult choices. Now is the time for you to weigh in on the policies and programs you think are most needed for our city. Please reach out to your Alder, and to me, to let us know what is important to you.

As challenging as the economy is for City government, it is even more challenging for families all around Madison.

That's why I created economic stabilization and recovery teams inside city government that meet weekly to work on every aspect of economic relief and recovery.

Recognizing that transportation is a backbone of the economy, we made sure our bus system never stopped operating. We adjusted service levels; we waived bus fares, and took steps to keep drivers and passengers safe. The buses never stopped running, thanks to our dedicated Teamster drivers, and we got many essential workers to their destinations on time. One constituent wrote: "Thank you for the safety precautions you are taking ... It means a lot to know that you care about your riders."

I issued an Emergency Order to take some of the financial burden off city residents. It was controversial, but we made parking free, waived late charges on the municipal services bill and property tax installments, and suspended some license and permit fees. I advocated – and continue to advocate – at the state and federal level for the type of relief the city cannot provide – unemployment relief, a ban on evictions, protection from utility shut offs, child care assistance – and much of that aid did come through. I am pushing hard now for further federal assistance from Congress.

We moved quickly to make curbside pickup from restaurants and stores easier and to develop an outdoor "Streatery" program help restaurants expand into parking lots and streets. Over 50 new outdoor cafes throughout the city will be open at least until the end of October, giving us ways to support our local businesses who have been impacted so much by the virus. One constituent wrote to praise the program saying it "has given residents a much-needed outlet to enjoy a meal ... outdoors and experience some human connection during a tumultuous time."

We rerouted buses off State Street to help the businesses there recover from the looting and destruction at the end of May. This type of violence is entirely unacceptable to me. We must build up State Street as a vital center for work, play and community, and we have an opportunity to build it differently – with an emphasis on welcoming a diversity of ownership, employees and customers – a downtown welcoming all Madisonians.

Other innovations may not be as noticeable. The City funds an array of community programs, from neighborhood centers to youth programming to employment training to senior services and more. Understanding that some of the needs in the community have changed, we modified their

contracts to allow them to meet the new challenges brought by COVID-19. And we directed additional funding to local organizations like the African Center for Community Development, Freedom Inc., UNIDOS, and the Dane County Collaboration of Black Service Providers to help connect community members, who are struggling, with resources to help them. So many of our local non-profits have been part of the solution.

To aid small businesses, the City expanded our KIVA loan program, providing matching funds to small business owners who are women, people of color, or low income. And our new Commercial Ownership Program, championed by Alder Baldeh, is a \$500,000 investment to help small business owners of color move from renting a space to owning property, accumulating that generational wealth that is so important to reducing disparities.

With that same wealth building strategy in mind, the City is supporting a \$5 million effort spearheaded by Dr. Ruben Anthony of the Urban League to increase homeownership in the Black community. In a similar vein, I joined the Common Council in increasing by 20%, to \$5.5 million per year, the City's annual commitment to expand the supply of new affordable housing. We've already brought about the addition of over 1,300 new units and more developments are planned. What the examples above highlight is that we are not just working to build back the economy we had - we are working together to build the economy and the City that we want, with more opportunities for those who have traditionally been left out.

And there is still much more to do.

**To further economic development**, we are working with the Common Council to develop a "Small Business Equity and Recovery" program, which will help small business owners of color, women, and other underrepresented groups to start or expand their businesses, and help keep them operating safely during the pandemic.

We are expanding our Green Power program to train and employ people underrepresented in the trades to install solar panels on City buildings and help us meet our renewable electricity goals.

We are working on programs to provide financial education to the community, to support developers from underrepresented communities, to use land banking to prevent displacement, to build and rehab housing that is affordable and sustainable, and much more.

We are working to create the economy and community we need to allow everyone the opportunity to thrive.

There is more to do to ensure that opportunity. When it comes to criminal justice issues, I hear too many voices expressing worry and pain:

- a mother who just wants her kids to grow up in a safe community, without fearing the police
- a police officer who joined the force because he was taught to be the change he wants to see in the world – and now feels demoralized to be seen as a symbol of the problem

- a young man who is tired of empty promises made by community leaders about when change will come to his neighborhood
- a father who doesn't want to take his young daughter down to State St. because the destruction will upset and confuse her
- I've heard from people who are afraid of gun violence
- And I've heard again and again from Black residents who have been pulled over for driving while Black, who have been watched while they shop, who have suffered racist verbal assaults, and who experience the pervasive pattern of being treated differently and worse by our criminal justice system.

All of these sentiments are real, and all need to be taken seriously. The Black Lives Matter movement has brought much-needed attention to the issues of police reform and reimagining public safety.

I believe the police have an important job to do in Madison. One of their key roles is to intervene and stop dangerous incidents when they occur, and to investigate them afterward to help keep them from recurring.

I want to be clear in acknowledging that the Madison Police Department has been a national leader in the Madison Method of policing. MPD's methods have informed national institutions and reform efforts such as the Police Executive Research Forum and President Obama's Task Force on 21<sup>st</sup> Century Policing.

That doesn't mean the department has been perfect, or that it can't continuously improve. We need to acknowledge the good work that has already been done, acknowledge the real harms experienced by the Black community in Madison and nationwide, and be clear-eyed about what needs to change.

One of the most important things we must do in this historic era of change is select a new police chief who shares our vision and our values. Madison has a rare opportunity to hire a new chief who understands trauma-informed policing, who approaches their work in communication and collaboration with the community, and who regards change with an open mind.

I invite you to follow the progress of the independent Police and Fire Commission as they solicit public input into their search for a new chief. I have urged them to move expeditiously – to ensure that we have a new chief by 2021 – and they are on track for that. Contact them with your ideas at [policechiefsearch@cityofmadison.com](mailto:policechiefsearch@cityofmadison.com).

The Common Council and multiple City committees are also moving forward reforms intended to raise the bar for police conduct in Madison, including a police monitor, a civilian oversight board and other recommendations from the Ad Hoc Task Force on Police Policy and Procedure. These are important reforms, but we also need to put more emphasis on prevention and diversion.

I believe that society has asked our police to do too much. With social services, mental health care, education and more consistently underfunded at the state and federal level, our officers are asked to serve as school aids, social workers, mental health specialists and more. As I've talked with police here in Madison, they recognize that they are not the answer to all our problems, and in fact are overworked, stretched thin, and often without the tools needed to address the problems they see in our community.

**Madison is advancing criminal justice reforms.**

This summer, the City and the School District worked together to end the contract for School Resource Officers. I stand ready to support MMSD and the teachers union as they work to envision and implement new solutions to school safety.

At the same time, our City has begun to re-envision how we handle 911 calls that don't include weapons, violence or threats. In testimony before the PFC, the African American Council of Churches called "for the establishment of an emergency response with a team of medical and crisis workers for those experiencing a mental health issue."

Alder Arvina Martin has been exploring this concept for some time and my office began researching it last year. Now a group of Alders and County Board Supervisors are working together to advance a pilot crisis response program to handle calls related to behavioral health issues. These programs in other cities have lifted thousands of calls off police, saving money and providing better outcomes for those with mental health problems.

As we grapple with a national pandemic, and strive to address systemic racism and inequality within our community, we face yet another critical challenge – the rising incidence of gun violence on our streets. This is not just a Madison problem, gun violence is on the rise in cities and towns nationwide.

Gun violence in Madison is not confined to, or rooted in, any one neighborhood or community. It affects the entire City, fueled by reckless and dangerous acts a few individuals, intent on settling scores and willing to endanger their neighbors or innocent bystanders in the process.

Our response must also be citywide. Traditional policing is an important and necessary strategy, and MPD is working hard to hold accountable those responsible for the recent gun homicides so we can avoid more senseless deaths. I talk regularly with Chief Wahl to keep apprised of the situation and MPD's response.

I also agree with Common Council President Sheri Carter that more needs to be done on the prevention side. There are programs working in cities across the country to interrupt gun violence, and we need to find the model that will work in Madison.

One current City effort uses a peer support model, intervening in situations where there is a risk of violent activity, and extending support to people affected by violence. Another prevention effort funded by the City works to help those formerly incarcerated to build better lives and reduce recidivism.

And while we must invest in programs specifically designed to reduce violence in our community, we can't forget that the best prevention is equitable access to opportunity. Madison is still one of the most challenging places in the country to raise a Black child. That MUST change. We must provide equitable access to housing, health care, education, employment, childcare, entrepreneurship – every opportunity in our community must be accessible for all our young people. Every level of government and all our institutions, public and private, must focus on this work and be part of the solution.

It's true that Madison faces big challenges – a global pandemic, urgent demands for racial justice, an uncertain economy, gun violence, and the ever-present climate crisis. Sometimes these struggles seem overwhelming. It can be hard to have hope. It's tempting to tear each other down rather than build each other up. Don't give in to that.

I am here to tell you that if anyone can get it right anywhere, we can get it right here in Madison. My commitment to you is that I will devote all of my time and energy to search for real solutions. I will do my best to consider all viewpoints and make decisions that I believe best serve Madison's families and neighborhoods.

I joined a neighborhood meeting the other day in an area that had just experienced a serious incident of gun violence. In so many communities, that meeting could have been full of fear and anger and blame. Here in Madison, people were asking how they could be part of the solution.

Where could they volunteer or donate to improve young people's lives, build stronger neighborhoods, and move Madison past this.

That – that right there – that's why I have hope. I have hope because of you – because this City never ceases to amaze me with its generosity and creativity. Because people in every neighborhood find ways to make each other's lives better, to help those who need it, and to work on our biggest problems – together.

That's why Madison is special. And that's why we will get through this together – because we know – as Senator Paul Wellstone used to say – that “we all do better, when we all do better.”

Thank you for listening. Please continue to take care of yourselves and each other, and join me in being part of the solution.