

Camden is STRONG and getting stronger every day

Mayor Victor G. Carstarphen Delivers 2024 State of the City Address

May 21, 2024

Remarks as Prepared for Delivery

Good evening!

Acting DCA Commissioner Jacquelyn Suárez, Legislators, County Commissioners, Council President Fuentes, members of City Council, Chancellor Antonio Tillis, Superintendent Katrina McCombs, Camden residents, clergy, business leaders and community stakeholders. I am proud to once again deliver my annual report on the State of the City, and I thank you for joining me here at Rutgers University-Camden.

It's always important that I thank my family and friends who are with us tonight. Thank you to my amazing daughters, my incredible mother and my loved ones. You are my inspiration and drive me to be better every day!

I also want to thank my staff, cabinet members and our municipal employees and TEAM CAMDEN for their tremendous effort.

I like to say it's a WE thing and not a ME thing. We are all working so hard on daily basis to make Camden Stronger! My administration and the entire team is getting the job done, improving the quality of life across Camden.

That is why...I am honored to inform you that the State of our City is STRONG and getting stronger every day. NOT JUST STRONG...BUT CAMDEN STRONG! Our community is thriving and real progress is being made.

This success is a result of hard work and collaboration. It's the strong partnership and the result of bonds built between residents, government, businesses, non-profits, the faith based leaders ...working to reimagine Camden and build a bright future for all.

Please join me in giving yourself a round of applause!

I'm excited to start with a topic that exemplifies the hard work that we have undertaken on behalf of our residents...and how we care for our municipal finances.

We have come a long way in short time and I could not speak to this group about progress if I could not tell you that we have made significant strides as it relates to how we care for the taxpayers money.

For the first time in a decade, we delivered early-proposed budgets to the City Council for three consecutive years (2022, 2023 & 2024). Council adopted these balanced budgets and the City submitted them to the Department of Community Affairs (Shout-out to Acting DCA Commissioner Jacquelyn Suárez) well before the statutory deadline. The partnership we have with the state and the support they give to the City of Camden is so appreciated and valued.

My team understands our fiduciary obligations by doing things on time – if not early – and making sure the public has full visibility into the process is just good government. And my team knows, that I have the same expectation as we move Camden forward!

Let's have a round of applause for that accomplishment!

Something else that highlights the city's financial commitment is our municipal bond rating. In 2014 Camden received a Triple B Plus Bond rating, its first investment grade rating in years. Then, in 2021 the City was upgraded to an A Minus. This year, we received our third upgrade in a decade to an A rating with a "stable outlook" by S&P.

Camden is now looked at as sound investment by credit rating agencies. These independent reviewers have basically upgraded Camden's credit score. In compiling their report, S&P highlighted the strength of the city's management. Given my background, this was a major priority – and we did it!

Our sound fiscal policies are allowing the city to make much needed investments in infrastructure, laying the foundation for future development. A big part of that is growth involves improvements to roads and underground utilities.

Fixing 182 miles of aging streets an infrastructure will take time, but we are making tremendous strides and have developed a capital plan, which I feel is addressing these needs while making Camden attractive to potential new development.

We are working along with our partners at Camden County, CCMUA, and Camden Community Partnership to continue an aggressive paving program. Since 2021, a total of 229 roads have been paved citywide with another 52 are slated for completion by the end of 2024. That's over 12,000 tons of asphalt, over 4,300 feet of curb installed, and more than 8,000 square yards of concrete poured!

And yes – 27th street in East Camden is now completely rebuild after 50 years! Let's have a round of applause for that! In addition, the SJ Port roads in South Camden, and 7th Street in North Camden are repaved.

The City (along with American Water) continue to invested in upgrading water mains, replacing lead service lines, including \$14 Million to upgrade City wells, in addition to replacing sewer and storm water lines, to alleviate flooding conditions.

And our partners at PSE&G are regularly making upgrades to support electrical demands and development.

These investments are being made citywide and touching every neighborhood and every ward.

These maps illustrate some of these improvements and the investment being made across Camden and in every neighborhood.

My Administration has been charged with working tirelessly to pave more streets than ever before. Each year you will see this map turn completely red as we pave more and more streets across Camden.

As many know, Camden has a storied history of industry and innovation. Household names like - Campbell's Soup, Victor Talking Machine, RCA, New York Ship, all have roots in our great city.

Flash forward a few decades, Camden is once again becoming the economic engine of this region, witnessing \$3 billion in new investment as businesses locate to our City. We have attracted businesses such as American Water, 76ers, Subaru, The Michaels Organization, NFI, Conner Strong, among others. These companies are committed to Camden and our residents.

Our longtime partners (for 155 years) at Campbell Soup have brought back 330 jobs and announced construction at their campus.

Lockheed Martin is bringing more than 300 new jobs to the city and Holtec International is building another 100,000 square foot building.

We are home to the Eds and Meds, which continue to define a new identity for our City. The Eds and Meds are the largest employers and continue to invest.

This includes Rutgers University-Camden's \$60 Million dollar Cooper Street Gateway Project. A 54,000 square foot facility along the 400 Block of Cooper Street. In addition to Virtua Health's \$500 Million dollar expansion of their Camden campus.

Plus the game changing \$2 Billion expansion by Cooper University Health Care. Thank you to George E. Norcross, III Chairman Cooper University Health Care/MD Anderson Cancer Center at Cooper for your commitment to City of Camden!

It takes partners, working in collaboration with our residents, faith-based leaders, the Eds & Meds community, to achieve these tangible results.

Another example of this incredible teamwork is the redevelopment of the Walter Rand Transportation Center.

The City, County, and State are all working together to make this transformational project happen.

I am grateful to Governor Phil Murphy for the \$250 Million dollar commitment to redevelop the Walter Rand Transportation Center.

This Walter Rand Transportation Center is Camden's front doorstep...and a regional transportation HUB for NJTRANSIT Bus and Light Rail and PATCO High Speed line.

This important project will help to support this region's future transit system needs for decades to come and will welcome visitors to the City of Camden and the State of New Jersey.

This project in combination with Cooper University Health Care's expansion will drastically change the entire appearance of Downtown Camden.

Moving Camden another step closer to being a model 21st century city.

We anticipate the new center to be a state-of-the-art mixed-use facility and act as a catalyst for new development.

When was a young kid growing up in Camden, I can remember all the pick-up basketball games played at the park. If I wasn't home by the times the streetlights came on – my mom and grandmother knew exactly where to find me.

You see, back then, our neighborhood parks were the epicenter of the community. It was where you would gather to enjoy time outside with family, hang out with friends, play basketball, baseball, football and much more.

Over the past few years, the City has been slowly chipping away in restoring our parks to their former glory days.

In fact, later this summer, we will reopen Elijah Perry Park which will truly complete Centerville's transformation.

And thanks to a generous donation from the 76ers, the basketball court at Farnham Park will be completed and ready to be utilized by our residents in Parkside.

I'm happy that we were able to restore these parks, but we need to do more and we need to pick up the pace. Trust me...we are about to pick up the pace.

This year, I am committing over five million dollars in ARP funds to renovate seven parks throughout the city. Let me repeat that – we will make a FIVE million dollar investment to SEVEN parks in our neighborhoods!

1. Ralph Williams Park (new basketball courts, sidewalk, & lighting)
2. North Gate Park (pickle ball courts, soccer court, sidewalk & lighting)
3. Yorkship Square Park (new benches, landscaping & lighting)
4. Spruce Street Park (basketball court, playground & landscaping)
5. Bradley and Ormond Park (benches, lighting & landscaping)
6. Whitman Square Park (playground, sidewalk & landscaping)
7. 26th & Howell Park (playground & passive exercise equipment)

Construction is expected to start in the fall of 2024. But wait – there's more!

In addition to all the great work currently being done in our parks by Camden County, Camden Community Partnership, and through collaborations with foundations and local corporations like the 76ers, you will see park improvements at:

1. Cornelius Martin Park in North Camden;
2. Judge Johnson Park (home of the Centerville Simbas); and
3. Von Nieda Park in Cramer Hill

When I make a promise – I keep a promise. You want safe and clean gathering places that families can enjoy – you got it.

Park improvements is just one piece of the puzzle. I want Camden residents to know that if we are serious about making key investments in our neighborhoods, we need to protect our investment by eliminating any hazards that will undo our progress.

In 2021, I announced my Camden Strong initiatives. This new program calls for carrying out of a series of targeted activities aimed at reclaiming our neighborhoods by stopping illegal dumping, beautifying the community through my annual Camden Strong clean-ups, demolishing unsafe structures, building upon our public safety efforts and responding to concerns which have impacted our community for far too long.

This strategy is quickly helping to improve the quality of life in our neighborhoods and transform Camden into the healthy community that we deserve.

In partnership with the Camden County Improvement Authority, the city has completed a \$15 million multi-phase residential demolition project. In combination with the planned commercial demolition project, these projects will result in the elimination of more than 300 total unsafe structures citywide. This totals more than 900 unsafe structures removed over ten years.

In 2021, I also committed \$6 Million dollars in APR funding to removing more than 70,000 tons of non-hazardous contaminated materials illegally dumped at 7th & Chestnut (known as the Yaffa site) in the Bergen Square neighborhood.

At a pace of nearly fifty trucks per day, we are nearing an end to this imposed affliction and terrible burden on our residents. Since the start of work, contractors have removed over 2,000 loads of soil, 500 loads of construction debris, 18 loads or 100 tons of tires, and more than 4,000 tons of trash, plastics, and solid waste.

My teammates and I are pleased to announce the last of this material is being removed by June! I am extremely proud to say, “We made a Promise to our Camden residents to clear this debris...and We kept that Promise”!

Let’s have a round of applause for our resilient residents

Quality housing is at the heart of a vibrant and healthy community. In fact, a new analysis released on May 6th by the media outlet Axios confirms that the City of Camden is increasingly a place where people want to live!

The new report, in which Axios analyzed data from the real estate website Zillow, found that the top three ZIP codes with the greatest home appreciation in the Philadelphia metro area are located in the City of Camden.

This demand for housing is proof that our public safety improvements, education reforms, and investments in job creation as well as unprecedented investment in quality of life are resulting in tangible growth.

Let’s have a round of applause!

Earlier this year, it was announced that Northgate One was acquired by Hudson Valley Property Group. Now we all know about what Northgate One was – we know about what it is – but more importantly, let talk about what is going to be.

The new owners have announced the building will soon undergo a \$130 million renovation while maintaining its affordability. The planned upgrades will include a complete building revitalization with fully accessible dwelling units, site infrastructure upgrades, mechanical system replacements, and a number of in-unit bathroom, kitchen and apartment safety improvements, with a vibrant, responsible, and safe community for residents.

Hudson Valley Property Group, brings a track record of providing high-quality affordable housing for their tenants. My administration is excited about the prospects of positive change, and the potential for a renovated Northgate One to help transform the surrounding North Camden community for the better.

I was excited to take part in the ribbon cutting at the Harrison in April. The Harrison is the second of four phases of the \$165 million redevelopment of Ablett Village in the Cramer Hill community.

This is a beautiful 55-unit mixed-income senior apartment complex with numerous amenities. Thank you to The Camden Housing Authority, Director Melody Johnson-Williams, and CEO John O'Donnell and VP of Development Nick Cangelosi both from The Michaels Organization!

I can still remember the day I stood next to HUD Secretary Fudge, Congressman Norcross, and others who are in the audience today, to announce the HUD grant award. It was a game changer, a tremendous moment for that community, and another milestone in the long-term commitment to our residents!

The Harrison and the reimagining of Ablett Village and redevelopment of Camden's exceptional quality public housing, represents what we can accomplish when we come together as a team.

And another new development is coming to Whitman Park. Oliver Station is another example of the same commitment to quality housing with an emphasis on improved quality of life.

The City and its partners at Virtua Health and The Michaels Organization hosted a groundbreaking on Oliver Station, a \$24 Million dollar mixed-use housing community and healthcare facility near the Ferry Avenue PATCO Station.

The project will integrate quality affordable senior housing with top-notch health care....focused on delivering and advancing health equity and an improved quality of life for Camden residents.

Oliver Station will be the 1st community in South Jersey of this kind.

Again, we are ecstatic to have two great community partners (The Michaels Organization and Dennis Pullin CEO at Virtua Health) bring affordable homes and direct access to high-quality health care within the community.

So to our seniors and Camden families, I can assure you, those who live at The Harrison, Ablett Village, Oliver Station, and the renovated Northgate One will be residing in the high-quality housing which you deserve.

These projects brings with it new opportunity, new jobs, and will be a catalyst for additional investment, in the Cramer Hill, Whitman Park, and North Camden neighborhoods.

So, now that you have heard about some of the immediate development-taking place, what is Camden is doing to sustain and support future growth and attract new investment?

The city continues to work with its partners at the Camden Redevelopment Agency, Camden County Improvement Authority and the New Jersey Economic Development Authority to actively market publicly owned properties, vacant land, and neighborhood sites for large-scale development.

At the same time, our efforts have been keenly focused on promoting our small businesses and enhancing the appearance along the city's commercial corridors.

Without a doubt, the backbone of the local economy has been and always will be the city's small business community.

They have supported the city in good times and bad times.

To help support our small businesses, I announced two programs. The CSSD Matching Grant Program, And the City of Camden UEZ - Camden Strong Facade Program.

These two programs offer grant dollars to small businesses who wish to enhance the appearance and look of their storefronts, while also addressing much needed building upgrades or even possible code compliance matters.

By leveraging resources like our Camden UEZ funding and other grant dollars, we aim to attract and encourage additional private investment.

In addition, the City and through the efforts of the Camden Business Improvement District are committed to promoting our commercial corridors, downtown, and supporting the business community.

The Camden BID has made significant progress, promoting events while beautifying the City's commercial districts.

I can assure you. Camden is absolutely "Open for Business" and we want to ensure City business are able to compete with others from throughout this region.

I believe we are fostering an environment that is attractive to developers, attractive to new businesses, and puts our City on a pathway to long-term success.

My administration remains firmly committed to local sourcing and local hiring initiatives. The City has been collaborating with Camden Community Partnership to continue to promote local employment through Camden Works.

Thank you to the Camden Community Partnership Board of Directors, my friend/CEO Dana Redd and CCP staff for managing Camden Works and for supporting all the great work taking place across Camden.

Let's have a round of applause for CCP!

Camden Works builds partnerships among city residents, local employers and workforce development agencies. This partnership allows residents to participate in the city's growth and prosperity by securing a living wage.

The goals are to:

- Match job seekers with local employment opportunities
- Monitor and improve the retention of residents employed

To date, the Camden Works has connected over 1,000 Camden residents with job opportunities.

I'm thrilled to announce, on Thursday, May 23, from 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m., the Camden Works Initiative, alongside the City of Camden, Camden City School District, Center for Family Services, and the Camden Education Fund, will host the Spring 2024 Camden Works Job & Resource Fair at the Camden High School Campus.

This is a gateway to new beginnings, promising to connect our residents with meaningful employment and resources. Together, let's strengthen our workforce, build pathways to success, and propel Camden's economic growth forward.

It is well documented that access to transportation has been associated with improved employment outcomes as it provides people with greater access to job opportunities.

As part of the Camden Works "first mile/last mile" study, research surveys in Camden showed 70% of the respondents of the study who did not own a vehicle rely on either public or active transportation.

Unlike other urban communities across the country, 58.5 % of households report only owning one or zero vehicles.

To help address these transportation barriers faced by many residents, The City & Camden Community Partnership launched Camden Loop, an On-Demand Micro-Transit Pilot Program.

The program implements a brand-new transportation option for residents who need to get to work within the City and provides efficient connections to public transit including NJ TRANSIT bus, rail, light rail, and PATCO commuter services.

The secondary focus is to support residents with better access to other social determinants of health needs, including health care appointments, food access, and similar services.

Camden Loop provides flexible and shared transportation at an affordable price of just \$2 per trip.

As we look toward our continued efforts to improve education outcomes for our youth, I'm happy to report that Camden schools are once again rising.

Like all city school systems across the country, the pandemic set our students back, but academic data now shows that Camden students are catching up.

And there is much to be proud of even beyond what our students are learning in the classroom. We are making efforts to ensure that once students graduate from our schools, they are prepared to succeed in college, a career of their choice, a trade, or the military.

In the 2011-12 academic year, exactly three students graduated as college ready. Since that time, we continue to increase the number of college bound students in the city. Just a couple weeks ago, we celebrated all of those students who have made a choice about what they are doing after

high school with our 4th annual Citywide College Signing Day, where I had the great pleasure of speaking to over 600 graduating seniors who will be pursuing higher education.

When you look at the progress and investments we've made over the past ten years in education, nothing stands out more than the renovation and rebuilding of our schools.

Our students not only deserve a quality education, but also facilities that make them feel valued. Last time I gave this speech, I was bragging about the completion of a new Camden High School, and now I'm doing the same about the construction of a new \$105 million dollar Eastside High School.

The new state-of-the-art Eastside facility will not only help expand the school district's current offering of Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs but will also serve as a beacon of equity, ensuring that all students across our city have access to high-quality educational resources and opportunities.

The district has proudly gone from one certified CTE program to now thirteen and is still growing. By enhancing our CTE offerings throughout the city and investing in the significant infrastructure of Eastside High, we are preparing our students for the jobs of today and empowering them to innovate for the jobs of tomorrow.

And we're seeing transformation in school buildings across the city. With the latest announcement for a new Eastside High School, over \$600 million dollars have been invested or committed to new school buildings in Camden over a decade. This investment has resulted in six brand-new school buildings and nine fully renovated buildings. That is fifteen new buildings in this city!

I want to thank Superintendent McCombs for her continued hard work on behalf of our students, as well as our academic partners. I know Camden can be an example of what a quality and equitable modern school system can look like. As a lifelong advocate of youth, I'm encouraged by what the future holds for our young people and our future leaders.

As we plan for Camden's future, we are making much needed improvements to programs and our community assets. This includes capital improvements to city ballfields, pools, community centers, and municipal facilities.

The City now boasts new EV Charging stations and electric vehicles at our new Fleet Management facility in South Camden. I also committed almost \$3 million dollars in ARP funds to the recently renovated Malandra Hall, Martin Luther King, and Isabel Miller community centers.

Over \$182,000 in CDBG grant funds will be used to upgrade showers, replace drinking fountains, purchase a new ADA access lift, and resurface the North Camden Pool. And another \$162,000 will be applied to pool repairs at the Isabel Miller Community Center.

Near Malandra Hall, \$455,000 in repairs will be made to Union Field. This includes new fencing, new seating throughout the complex, and a new scoreboard. In addition, \$575,000 will be used to replace the turf field at Stockton Station Park.

Clearly, we have a solid capital improvement plan in place as we make these long-term improvements at our facilities.

The City's Department of Human Services, is also working to provide enhanced programming for children, seniors, and families through collaborations with the 76ers, NFL Flag Football, DoorDash, Camden County Police Department, Camden City School District, Center for Family Services, Rutgers University-Camden, Raise the Bar and other community partners.

Again, we are making sound investments, which will benefit our Camden residents for years to come.

The foundation for this success remains deeply based on the hard work undertaken through our Public Safety efforts.

We all must recognize the transformational powers and the positive presence our Camden County Police Officers have in our neighborhoods. We are seeing a reduction in crime because our police force is one that represents our community.

We are witnessing results and that is a FACT. Crime is down to its lowest level in over 55 years. Let me repeat that – its lowest level in over 55 years!

Let's have a round of applause

I commend Chief Rodriguez and his senior leadership and the men and women of the Camden County Police Department for their tremendous service to the City of Camden and to our residents.

I am positive that our police force will remain engaged with our community to build trust with our residents and stakeholders.

TRUST in our police – TRUST in our government – can be achieved when we are held accountable. That is what Team Camden strives to accomplish every single day.

Nothing characterizes my commitment to our city and belief in teamwork like Team Camden.

Team Camden began organically as a product of our widely successful Camden Strong community cleanups.

Our cleanups are now in the 4th year. We have had incredible attendance this year as more than 300 attended our kick-off in Cramer Hill. In this picture, you can see over 400 volunteers participated at the May 8th cleanup with CEO Mark Clouse and Campbell's in North Camden.

My administration and our team members are giving 100%. Together, we are creating a brighter future for our community. Thank you Team Camden!

Give yourself a nice round of applause!

As Team Camden grows, it's more than just a group of volunteers at a cleanup. The team is about a much larger belief and a growing confidence in Camden, a belief in our resilient residents and a confidence in the city's resurgence.

Please know, WE are all playing an active part in Camden's historic transformation.

We are making incredible progress; you can see it, change is taking place citywide.

WE all believe in Camden!

###