



**MAYOR MARIA RIVERA**  
**Fiscal Year 2024 Budget Address**

Good evening, President Ferri, Honorable Members of the City Council, Department Directors and staff, and residents of our city.

It's a privilege to be standing before you tonight delivering my third budget address.

Thinking back to when I first ran for office and spoke with thousands of our neighbors across our city, I heard over and over that we could be better – our services could be more accessible, our streets could be safer, and our city could become the best community in Rhode Island for helping *all families* thrive.

I committed to making these a reality, and three years later, we've made huge progress.

Our Administration has worked tirelessly to ensure that the Central Falls of today works for every person that lives, works, and visits here. And moreover, that the Central Falls of tomorrow excels our economy and our future generations.

It's no surprise we've been recognized on local and national levels for our work over the last year – from our boots-on-the-ground effort to making our city healthier, to creative new housing solutions, to unique opportunities that empower our youth. And we're still going!

Using this momentum, I am proud to present you tonight with a balanced, proposed Fiscal Year 2024 budget that meets the current needs of our city and lays the foundation for successful years ahead.

This budget not only supports our necessary operations, services, and programs, but it compliments key federal and state dollars and grants we've proudly won that bring our beautiful vision for Central Falls to life. Thank you to our Fund Developer Derek Collamati for helping secure so many of these funds.

**Housing is Happening**

With the darkest days of COVID-19 behind us, one of the greatest issues that grew during the pandemic remains: our housing crisis. After our Housing Summit, I committed to adding 200 new units of housing during my first term as mayor, and as one of the top 30 densest cities in the United States, we need to get creative to reach this bold goal.

This summer, our new single-family homes on Washington and Hood Street built by local Building Futures students will be completed and sold to city residents, along with nine new townhomes on Chestnut Street that this budget invests in. Central Falls residents will have exclusive access to purchase these homes.

Looking ahead, we're also gearing up for the groundbreaking of our 47-unit Broad Street Homes project, 100 units on Roosevelt Avenue, 31 units at the old Broad Street School, our new five-unit Reed Avenue townhouse project, and completing the master plan for our mixed-use Conant Thread mill buildings.

Let's give a round of applause to the amazing team we have here in our city! Planning Director Jim Vandermillen, Solicitor Matt Jerzyk and our amazing team and community partners who make this possible: thank you. I also want to give a shoutout to our Nuisance Task Force, that has been working hard to ensure more properties are safe for families and support our community's needs. Thank you, Assistance Solicitor Jose Batista, for leading this effort.

Housing is happening here!

Of course, we're not just focused on building new homes – we need our existing homes safe for the families living in them.

We're on track to certify another 200 units of housing to make sure that they are free of lead poisoning, and after winning a new grant that further invests in this work, will be giving our residents even more resources and opportunities that support safer, healthier housing. Tyler Romero in our Law Department, thank you for your leadership on this.

It's been more than a decade since we thoroughly reviewed our city governance structure to ensure it supports our 21<sup>st</sup> century needs. I am launching a Charter Review Commission this year, with proposed amendments to the Charter to be approved by voters during the special fall election.

As we think about city government, it's no secret that my vision for Central Falls has included a revived community center that truly puts constituent services front and center. This budget proudly invests in El Centro, our new one-stop community center for residents, which is well on its way to becoming reality. Our architect is hard at work designing this Broad Street space, with construction starting later this year.

At El Centro, residents will easily access a wide-range of services, spearheaded by our Office of Constituent Services and Health. From mental and behavioral health needs, to housing and food security, to senior and youth services, and more, I'm looking forward to announcing our participating service partners soon. Thank you to our leaders who will be accelerating this work in the months ahead: Zuleyma Gomez and Wanda Casiano.

### **An Accessible, Affordable, Sustainable Future**

As more residents choose to live here, I want to do all we can to make this city more accessible and affordable. I'm proud to share we are expanding our partnership with the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority to continue our successful free starting ride pilot program through this summer, and widening its reach to include our new Pawtucket-Central Falls Transit Center.

Beyond bolstering use of public transportation, other efforts to help make the cost of living more affordable have made a big impact, like our campaign to rollout the Affordable Connectivity Program – now being replicated in other communities – which successfully connected more than 70% of eligible households to the internet, making us number one in the state, and our community electricity aggregation program, which is bringing cleaner, cheaper electricity to residents.

These efforts are an important part of creating a more sustainable future for Central Falls. This budget also invests in our city's first Sustainability Officer – part of our 2023 Climate Action Plan – that works to build a more resilient future for us all. I want to give a special shoutout to our impressive intern, Logan Torres, who spearheaded the development of this plan and got our city focused on this important issue. Thank you.

And as we support our environment, our parks and outdoor recreational spaces are a big part of that. We'll be opening our new basketball court at High Street, our renovations to Jenks Park will commence, our exciting Phillip Street Community Garden will officially open this year, and so will our new beautifully-renovated Garfield Street Park for families to enjoy. These have been made possible thanks to outstanding relationships we've established with community partners.

In addition to the important work of our Planning Department, I want to give an important thanks to our Parks and Recreation Director Alberto Rivas and his team who has been instrumental in bringing our vision for parks and recreation spaces to life.

All around our city, we'll be planning much-needed road and sidewalk repairs that this budget invests in, with matching funds thanks to the state's Municipal Road Fund Program. Thank you to our DPW Director, Jean Barros, and his team for working to maintain our streets and spaces year-round.

## **A Safer City**

I'm pleased to share that our city is even safer than last year – with crime already down 25% in 2023. And while our overall crime and violent crime rates are consistently the lowest they've been in decades, I want to do more to proactively protect our families.

From new layers to our Safer Streets Program, like the rollout of red light cameras and additional speed bumps, to new body cameras for our every patrol officer thanks to state and federal funds, to the investment in security cameras in our parks, we are taking steps forward that better protect every resident. Thank you for your leadership on this, Colonel Anthony Roberson, and the entire Department committed to a safer city.

Along with our Police Department, our Fire Department has been a big part of keeping our community safe. I'm thrilled they will finally be receiving a new fire engine truck this year, thanks to our federal delegation. Fire Chief Scott Mello, thank you for your continued service and dedication to our community, and for always working tirelessly to protect us all.

Captain Richard Botelho, Lieutenant Keith Williams, Firefighter Ryan Griffin, Firefighter Tyler Carr, Firefighter Andrew Hilton, and Firefighter Steven Colabella: I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart on behalf of our community for your commitment and dedication to every situation – especially after this tough past week – one where so many of us have been impacted by devastating news around a beloved young woman you fought hard for. I know your work is not easy and I can only imagine the toll it takes on each of you, knowing you always do everything you can to save a life. Because of your resilience and rescue work, I continue to think about investments in our public safety, and why this is so important. Thank you.

I am proud to share another investment this budget makes: the re-launching of our Central Falls Domestic Violence Task Force. I believe it's incredibly important that we prioritize education and outreach around this life-saving, not-talked-about-enough topic, including to our middle and high school students. Conversations on healthy relationships, communication, and safety should be commonplace, and I'm proud of this investment.

## **Youth and Education**

As we think about youth services, we now have many synchronized initiatives efforts to support this work. Thanks to a grant by the Department of Education, we have a new citywide afterschool program coordinator for organized out-of-classroom learning, while we continue to advance summer opportunities that keep our youth engaged and safe, like our new Youth Career Empowerment Summer Program that gives students hands-on learning and mentorship in their desired career fields.

We will also be expanding our nationally-recognized Leading Ladies Initiative, which gives unprecedented leadership empowerment to future generations. We also continue to invest in Central Falls Public Library and hope to strengthen our partnerships with their programming.

It's no secret that education in Central Falls has been a topic of conversation as we make big strides forward. We're breaking ground on our highly-anticipated new High School this year, investing in the significant improvements at Calcutt Middle School, and planning for amazing facilities upgrades at all of our other school buildings. This budget supports the creation and investment in our School Construction Revolving Fund for responsible and planned school construction spending.

Recently, we engaged our community around the opportunity to serve on the Central Falls Board of Trustees to govern our schools. This is a vital time for education in our city, and we will continue working to involve our students, teachers, parents, and residents in changes and improvements ahead.

## **Fiscally Responsible**

When I took office, I knew our city's relatively small budget would be a challenge. With so many critical services and residents, every dollar counts! I am proud that this fiscally responsible budget contains strategic, shared services – like continuing to share a joint Planning Commission, a Code Enforcement and Building official with

Pawtucket (saving \$60,000) and a new decision to share Human Resources with North Providence (saving \$30,000).

Furthermore, we've increased strategic community partnerships that can help fill the gaps of support that help our community in specific ways, like helping secure \$1 million in funding for Jenks Parks Pediatrics from the Papitto Foundation that directly aides the evolving health needs of our community, to a partnership with the Housing Authority to provide exciting programming for our seniors, to the Elisha Project to help address families facing food insecurity.

I want to give a special thanks to our Finance Director, Mary Signer, and our City Clerk, Alberto DeBurgo, for your help making this budget and organized process possible. And to our Human Resources Director, Ana Urena, thank you for supporting the work of our many Departments and continued help with city processes.

Our city staff truly do amazing work, and I believe it's important to continue to invest in the leadership and development of our team. This budget supports one Leadership Rhode Island spot per year to continue to do just that. I also recognize that it's not just our staff leading our city, we have amazing community members who serve on our Boards! This budget supports increased stipends to recruit and retain talented, engaged members.

### **Business Friendly**

I want Central Falls to become a leading city where more businesses choose to open their doors and grow. This budget continues the investment in our new Small Business and Workforce Coordinator position, who not only connects our businesses with key resources and programs, but supports our local workforce by organizing helpful job fairs and engagement with employers.

We'll continue to support our business community this way, and I am proud to share that this business-friendly budget provides a new \$20,000 exemption on tangible property, and includes no increase in our commercial tax rate.

I also want Central Falls to become a leading city where more families choose to stay. This budget invests in increased Other Post-Employment Benefits (OPEB) spending for our retiree benefits. And for all our vehicle owners, the car taxes have been eliminated.

I look forward to all the exiting ways we will continue to celebrate our city, residents, and businesses in the months ahead, like one of my favorite times of the year: Central Falls Restaurant Week!

Looking ahead to other exciting events, thanks to our hard-working team, gracious grant funding, and continued budget investments in our amazing departments like Parks and Recreation, we have an exciting line up of events for our residents, from our two beloved Salsa Nights, to our Food Truck Festival, to our Summer Basketball League, to our fun Youth Kayak Program, to our Jazz Nights, and so much more.

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to ALL of our city department leaders and team, who have stayed committed to our Administration's mission to progress our city forward, and provide programs and services that are accessible, a community that is safe and engaging, and a city that helps families from all backgrounds thrive. Directors and staff, please stand! Thank you. You help make our vision and our amazing progress possible every day.

Members of the Council, we have an important, exciting year ahead. Thank you for your partnership in this work.

To everyone in our community: thank you. Together, we are starting the next amazing chapter of Central Falls, and I'm proud you are part of it.

¡Que Dios te bendiga a ti y a nuestra hermosa ciudad! May God bless you, and our beautiful city!