

Holyoke mayor outlines 2nd-term plans; City Council, School Board reorganize

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HOLYOKE — Mayor Joshua Garcia says Holyoke is ready for its next chapter — one focused on equity, economic growth and rebuilding trust.

A panel of new and incumbent city councilors, School Committee members and the mayor were officially sworn in Monday at City Hall.

During the ceremony, Garcia outlined plans in his second term to tackle affordability, homelessness, addiction and infrastructure, while leveraging new economic leadership in the city.

The School Committee will elect its new president and vice president at 6 p.m. Tuesday at Dean Technical High School, according to incumbent member Devin Sheehan.

City Council shifts

The City Council also reorganized Monday, voting to make Tessa Murphy-Romboletti president; Councilor Israel Rivera was chosen as vice president.

Murphy-Romboletti noted that the council now has a majority of women for the first time, calling the day one of “representation, perspective and progress,” and pledging to work more collaboratively with colleagues.

“Every person here shows up with the intentions of working together and moving the city forward,” she said.

Murphy-Romboletti said the election brought significant change. Recent disagreements in the council were not the problem — it was how councilors treat each other during those moments.

“A wise former council president (Joseph McGivern) once told me that my job in this role is not necessarily to get everyone to agree but to bring as many people to the middle as possible. I promise to continue to lead that way,” she said.

Murphy-Romboletti said she’s excited to get back to work, and grateful for Holyoke’s trust and her colleagues’ support.

With important decisions ahead in the coming weeks, she pledged to dive in, bring positive energy and focus on collaboration.

Rivera, the council’s new vice president, said he’ll continue initiatives launched in 2021 and advance programs to help the Community Response Division address homelessness and substance use.

“Substance abuse is near and dear to me, so I want to make sure we are keeping it at the forefront,” he said.

Rivera thanked colleagues who voted for him and those who reached out with support, acknowledging the recent circumstances surrounding his drunk-driving [arrest](#) in December.

“It speaks volumes to the resilience in the community and the support. I appreciate that and so does my family,” he said.

New City Councilor Anne Thalheimer plans to build community through events and a newsletter for Ward 3.

“I want people to meet, hang out and connect beyond their immediate neighbors,” she said.

The newsletter will share office hours and building access. “Just making sure people feel like that they have someone to talk to but also know that person is me, and I am easily approachable,” she said.

Thalheimer also plans to keep an eye on the Save Elmwood Forest campaign, and work on traffic control, street repaving and speed bumps.

Incumbent City Councilor Linda Vacon aims to continue assisting residents who feel the tax burden of living and doing business in Holyoke, she said.

“Especially for long-term Holyoker’s who are living on a fixed income, who have paid off their home,” she said.

Vacon said residents in her ward are barely getting by, and it’s “getting to a tipping point.”

She plans to push for the most generous exemptions the city can offer.

“Some call us obstructionists, but we’re trying to keep city government the right size for taxpayers,” she said.

Garcia sets priorities for 2nd term

Garcia, Holyoke’s first Puerto Rican mayor, began his second term Monday after running unopposed.

This next term, Garcia aims to see through his [Municipal Finance Modernization Act](#) and eventually build a new middle school.

He said he will continue to focus on blight, housing and strengthening the community response team, while also working with the new economic development director, Eric Nakajima, to promote growth.

Garcia also pledged support for educators and public service providers, and planned to improve public safety and build community pride.

Garcia said four years ago, when he was first elected, that Holyoke’s defining trait was resiliency.

At the time, Garcia said he acknowledged inherited challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic, fiscal instability, education receivership and systemic inequity, he said. Support has been “limited” and “inconsistent,” often meaningless, leaving the city to shoulder the burden on its own.

Now, Garcia said he’s energized to pursue stronger state and federal partnerships to help deal with problems.

“This new chapter is an opportunity to dismantle historic inequities and structural barriers with the goal of improving the quality of life and health outcomes in every neighborhood from West Holyoke to South Holyoke,” the mayor said.