

Mayor David N. Cicilline
2005 Budget Presentation

Before I begin I would like to ask everyone to stand and join me for a brief moment of silence for Detective Sergeant Jimmy Allen, who gave his life for his city.

Good evening. I would like to thank the Providence City Council and all the citizens who are here for the important annual budget presentation. It is a great honor to be with you this evening.

Tonight I am going to break with tradition. It is customary for the Mayor to deliver an address to the City Council outlining a detailed budget for the next fiscal year. Having observed that custom twice before a final budget emerged that looked significantly different, I have come to realize that it is ultimately a disingenuous exercise.

A budget equation has two sides: revenue and spending. You need the first to figure the second. The fact of the matter is we simply can't calculate the revenue side yet. We don't know whether the state will return to Providence what we're due. That's in the hands of the Governor and the General Assembly and it won't be known for months.

In the past, we made guesses based on historic trends and what appeared objectively reasonable, but we were disappointed. I believe it would be misleading to the residents of Providence to go through that exercise again.

Rest assured. Any final budget will build on the progress of the last two years. We will continue to do more with less, and make City Hall leaner, smarter and stronger. The document I am submitting tonight certainly reflects that as it closes what would have been a \$40 million dollar budget gap. It cuts more jobs to bring the total to 425 since 2003. It level funds or reduces 40% of Mayoral departments. It cuts double-digit health care costs in half through new plans and co-shares, and it reflects our improved financial standing in the bond markets.

But given the unknown forecast on revenue, I believe it will be more instructive to give an overview of the fundamental forces shaping our financial picture, and to offer as clear an idea as possible of how your tax dollars are being managed.

I will also use the occasion to make the case at the State House for our fair share from the state – and it is important that we use that language. The discussion needs to be around what *we are owed*. Not our *need*. We are not talking about “aid.” We are talking about what belongs to our tax payers.

As the one large urban center and the seat of business, finance, culture, and government for the State, Providence is the catalyst for the majority of Rhode Island's wealth. We require the state to return a larger proportion of money to Providence because Providence generates the lion's share of money for the state. We do that in two ways. One way is

through direct revenue from taxes and fees like income taxes, business taxes, sales taxes, etc. The other way is through our infrastructure – tangible things like roads and buildings, but also things like professional networks and educational opportunities. We maintain the economic machine that is at the disposal of all Rhode Islanders.

To be very frank, we are at a frustrating moment in our city's budgetary history. I am reminded of the opening sequence from the movie, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, when Indiana Jones makes his way through a cave slipping past elaborate booby traps before finally reaching an altar with an ancient golden treasure. After grabbing it, he realizes he's triggered a trap, and has to sprint out of there, narrowly escaping slings and arrows until he leaps out to daylight and safety. Relief at last. And then...click. A gun to his head. A smuggler was waiting in ambush. Hand it over.

Well, in our real world story, Providence is the hero. The trip through the cave was the last two years of blood, sweat, and tears spent restructuring the fiscal and managerial damage done over the past decades. And the gun to the head is the statewide school funding crisis.

This statewide school funding and property tax crisis threatens the incredible fiscal progress this city has made over the last two years. No, this problem is not new to us, but it has multiplied this year, and no city or town is being spared. Meanwhile, the state has had no effective response. Our delegation has pleaded our case, but on deaf ears. Now it can't be ignored because the problem is everywhere.

Rhode Island's over-reliance on property taxes to fund schools has indeed mushroomed into a crisis, and we're paying for it. If there is a silver lining it is that, in sharp contrast to years past, Providence is positioned best – not worst – among Rhode Island cities and towns to weather this blow.

Let me be very clear. The sky is not falling – far from it. There is a tremendous amount of good news to report about the financial management of Providence. But this exploding crisis sets us back. And it is especially frustrating because we at the city level have little power to rectify it.

But before I discuss the statewide school funding and property tax crisis, and what I believe is the state's obligation to support cities and towns through it, let's look at the issues over which we have full control – those being the repair of long-term city finances and management of city services.

As you can see, we have drastically reined in budget growth over the last two years. The important thing to keep in mind is that it has been done without a reduction in city services. Further, these have been difficult cuts. It wasn't a matter of just downsizing, which is itself extremely hard. What drives our budget growth is really the result of bad decisions made a long time ago. The main budget cost drivers are health care, pensions, and interest on old debts.

The cost of health care, pensions, and debt interest account for almost a quarter of every dollar the city spends. We have had to make drastic reductions in other costs to make room for their growth, but we are also addressing them head-on. That is why the work that this administration and many of the city employees have done to reach new, professional union contracts is so important.

As everyone knows, the health care system in this country is a mess. It is extremely expensive, and generally unaffordable for employers to cover the full cost of it. I am proud to say that most of our union workers have understood this and worked with us to lower the costs of health insurance to the city's taxpayers. A rising cost trend that was unsustainable is becoming more manageable.

The terrible shape of the city's pension system is one of the most shameful legacies of financial management in years past. It was a case of double delinquency. Not only did the city accept contracts that required irresponsibly high contributions for overly generous benefits. It also grossly neglected its payment commitments, skimming from the fund instead to leave the problem for later generations – that's us.

As a first step, we are funding our pension commitments to levels as high as we consider responsible given all our other obligations. I also created a pension review committee of experts to provide me with recommendations for solving this challenge. What I already know is that we must make major changes. We will implement some combination of a reduction in benefit, an increase in employee contribution, and an increase in the retirement age.

From the beginning, public safety has been one of my major priorities. I have been unwilling to compromise our safety because of inherited budget problems. And I'm proud to say that it has paid off in a double-digit drop in crime for two years in a row. But the employees of these departments cannot be exempt from the kind of fair deals that govern all other city employees. It is simply unfair to taxpayers.

I know that firefighter union members are frustrated by the lack of a resolution to our contract negotiations. So am I. I have immense admiration for the work they do. And my team is negotiating with the union on a weekly basis. But let me be very clear. I will never accept a contract that is unfair to the taxpayers of this city. Not if their PR campaign unfairly attacks me. Not if they poster every telephone pole. Not if they picket my every move. I will never accept a contract unfair to Providence taxpayers.

Irresponsible borrowing over the years piled up debt and battered our City's credit rating. That was a major liability because, in addition to the mountain of debt we had to pay off, our bad credit meant we were doing so at a higher interest rate. This compounded the problem and sent projected costs spiraling. We have made major strides to service our debt, and rating agencies have responded, improving our status.

It has taken a total transformation of City Hall operations to absorb the cost of the major budget drivers. We have made historic cuts in staffing over the last two years. Some targets were ripe for cutting, but most were not. Ask our city workers and many will tell you that they feel understaffed. Frankly, they are. Amazingly, they are actually improving the delivery of city services.

In addition to taming the three budget drivers, the other path to long-term fiscal health is to expand the tax base. The progress here has been nothing less than historic. Restored investor trust in city government has helped to usher in \$1.8 billion dollars of new investment that is currently in the pipeline. This is the path to lower taxes and we are getting there, but there is a delay between the investment and the dividend to taxpayers. However, preliminary data appear to be showing the first expansion of the tax base in the City of Providence since 1992.

It is a great source of pride to me and this administration that we are moving Providence down the tax ladder compared to other Rhode Island cities and towns. When comparing taxes paid on a \$300,000 home, Providence ranks 14th in the state. We're moving down the list, and we intend to keep it that way.

Despite the deep cuts I have discussed, city operations have carried on tirelessly to improve services. It is an extraordinary feat on the part of our city workers and the quiet, effective leadership of our Director of Operations and our department directors.

As I have said many times, we are in the process of modernizing City Hall into a 21st-century professional organization. One of the tools helping us to do that is called ProvStat. It is a system for analyzing our practices in search of new efficiencies, and I wanted to share with you two recent examples of how it is being used.

At the Fire Department, we used ProvStat to help us target our fire prevention efforts more effectively.

At the Parks Department, ProvStat helped us track the effectiveness of new personnel policies.

Even in the difficult budget environment of recent years, we have introduced important new services that have had a big impact on our quality of life. This year will be no different. We are beginning the process of expanding the automated trash program that has been such a success in Olneyville, where it has significantly reduced street debris and rodents.

We are rolling out the first elements in a new approach to road maintenance. When complete, it will change DPW from a reactive repair agency to a proactive preventive agency, making our roads safer smoother.

Our Recreation Department will have more and better offerings than ever this year despite major budget cuts. This is due to its extraordinary partnership with the Providence After School Alliance. Recreation and PASA are making Providence a national leader in after school programs.

The vast majority of city workers are professional people who want to earn a good living through honest, hard work. That's why it has been so important to change the old, corrosive hiring practices that installed unqualified people and politicized the incentive system. We now have a professional personnel department that is transforming that old culture.

We are doing our part. The state must do its part too. But before we look at the statewide school funding and property tax crisis in greater detail, I want to make something very clear. The Governor and I are in different parties but we do productive work together, especially on economic development. But this is not about him or about me or a personal relationship. It is about you, the tax payer.

When the Governor released his budget in February, I called it a back-door property tax increase, because it did nothing to fix the wasteful system of education funding that relies far too heavily property taxes. It did not propose new ideas for capturing savings through economies-of-scale. And it did not significantly increase the return to cities and towns.

This is a policy choice by the Governor to increase local property taxes. There is no other rational interpretation.

Here is that back-door property tax increase coming true in communities all over the state. These are some of the cities and towns that have completed their budgets and their projected increase in taxes for the next fiscal year. Some have had to ask for a waiver from the state to exceed the 5.5% cap on annual property tax increases. And this is only a partial list.

This is the result of a broken system. Education costs are going up across the country, but what's different about Rhode Island is our over-reliance on property taxes to pay for education. We're second worst in the nation – 49th out of 50.

Now, you may be thinking that taxes are taxes. Wouldn't property tax relief just require shifting all those costs to another form of taxation? The answer is no. And that is the major point here. When the administration of school finances is centralized, there are huge savings to be captured. It's the principle of economies-of-scale. It's what happens when we no longer have 35 different offices in 35 different school districts doing all

kinds of redundant activities from ordering number two pencils to making revenue projections to managing human resources.

I like to cite Michigan as a model for our state on this issue because it successfully confronted a very similar situation a decade ago. A Republican governor and Democratic legislature made education more equitable and affordable by centralizing education funding. Residents paid more in taxes to the state but their local property taxes went down dramatically, netting taxpayers a huge overall tax cut. Over the first eight years, taxpayers saved a net total of 17 billion dollars. That was an average of over 2 billion a year that stayed in taxpayers' pockets.

Here is the cost of state inaction in Providence. Our school department projects almost a \$14 million budget shortfall even after two years of deep, deep cuts. We have cut 280 teaching positions. We have negotiated a union contract fair to both taxpayers and educators that requires a first-ever health care co-pay, a longer school day, and improved management rights. And we have thinned our central administrative staff to a skeleton crew. In fact, two recent studies showed that we have among the smallest ratios of central staff to student population of any urban school district in New England.

Even the rate of inflation has grown faster than the Providence Schools budget over the last two years. We have done our part. The state must do its part.

There are three ways in which the state could support its Providence constituents until the longer-term issues of property tax relief and school funding are addressed. One is through increased direct revenue. That is, it could return what we believe is due Providence in funding. The second is by giving us the flexibility we seek to generate non-property tax revenue. And the third is by simply funding programs like PILOT and General Revenue Sharing to the levels prescribed by law – just returning what legally belongs to Providence taxpayers.

Instead of providing property tax relief, the state has done just the opposite in recent years, by providing a smaller and smaller share of education costs.

Providence owns and operates the Water Supply Board, which serves nearly 70% of Rhode Island. But for all intents and purposes it is a charitable service we provide because the state has taken from us the authority to recoup our investment. We are forced to sell water at the cheapest price in the state, yet ten Rhode Island communities that buy from us turn around and resell it at a profit. The state is handing that profit to other communities. We are again asking the state this year to unstack the deck against Providence by lifting this restriction, and allow us to recover a reasonable rate of return on our investment.

Unfunded state mandates are another big barrier to efficiency and savings. This is a case of good intentions from high up going awry for local property tax payers.

For instance, the state requires one of the highest student-teacher ratios for special education in the nation. It turns out this is unnecessary and may even be counterproductive. Our kids in special ed would do just as well or better at slightly higher ratios and it would save millions.

Additionally, the state requires the School Department to pay for non-public school services such as bus transportation, textbooks, bus monitors and nurses for families who choose to send their children to private schools.

And, while Providence must live under legal restrictions that impede our fiscal health, the state flouts laws that call for a greater return to cities and towns in the form of Distressed Cities, General Revenue Sharing, and Payment in Lieu of Taxes. The Governor's budget falls short of its legal obligation by six and a half million dollars on these obligations to Providence.

When the Governor delivered his budget, he proclaimed that cities and towns would have to do some belt tightening. We've tightened our belt. The truth is local property tax payers can barely breathe. We are doing our part. Unfortunately, the Governor is not doing his.

In Providence, we have made painful cuts in staffing. We have modernized and streamlined our programming. We are taming the costs of debt and healthcare. If the Governor could do just one of those things -- if he could capture a ten percent co-share from state workers and switch to the less expensive health plan we use -- that alone would likely be enough to save cities and towns from a local property tax increase and allow us fund the education of our kids the way we should.

Ladies and gentlemen, you are doing your part. Providence is doing its part. Because of this we are in the best position among Rhode Island cities and towns – not the worst as in years past – to weather the property tax crisis. I hope and expect that Providence residents will get what they deserve: no increase in property taxes.

But the state *must* do its part. If it is true that the Governor has made a policy decision to allow an increase in local property taxes, then it is up to members of the General Assembly and to them alone to stop that in its tracks.

But we need their action this year. This session. Now.

Long-term things like a revised school funding system need attention as soon as possible, but short-term things can ensure a fairer return to Providence immediately. I ask the General Assembly to make sure that the state fulfills its legal responsibility to fund PILOT, Distressed Cities, and Revenue Sharing. Allow the Water Supply Board to capture a return on its investment. Pass legislation to bring fairness to the state system of road maintenance. Pass the red light camera legislation.

In the meantime, I will do absolutely everything in my power to ensure a flat tax rate. If that means spending every penny of political capital I may have on Smith Hill, I will do it. If that means creative use of an executive order, I will issue it. If that means controversial legal action, I will pursue it.

We have sacrificed enough. We are doing our part. It is time for the state to do its part too.

On many fronts, the City of Providence and the State of Rhode Island are working better together than ever before. We're luring and growing businesses, and we're garnering national attention for our work on arts and tourism. We've shown what happens when we become partners. When we abandon each other we both lose. When we come together we both win.

Thank you.