



State of the City Address

February 9, 2004

David N. Cicilline, Mayor
City of Providence, Rhode Island

Governor Carcieri, Senator Reed, Senator Chafee, Distinguished Members of the City Council, Honored Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Imagine a city of tree-lined streets, thriving neighborhoods, and a bustling and revitalized downtown.

Imagine young people who are taking responsibility, mentoring younger children, achieving in school, planning their futures.

Imagine businesses clamoring to locate in one of dozens of enterprising, rejuvenated neighborhoods, and bringing with them jobs, opportunity, and investment.

Imagine seniors, small children, families, and immigrants all safely and proudly making their way to a better life in a city that is economically and socially strong.

Imagine a city government that is active, effective, responsive and smart... an ally to every community in creating opportunities and solving problems.

Imagine Providence, as I do, as the ideal place for raising a family, going to school, crafting a career, building a business, participating in politics, or enjoying the cultural and artistic pleasures of urban life.

The work we are doing is making this vision a reality.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I am pleased to report to you that the State of our City is strong. In fact, Providence is well on its way to becoming the most livable city in America.

I hold this belief after a year of work that shows, beyond any doubt, that Providence is a city on the move, a city that is working, and working better than ever before.

What will ensure continued progress toward this destination?

The answer lies in how much we have accomplished in just one single year.

In every corner of City Hall, in every neighborhood, in every tract of land now slated for development and renewal, there is proof that our hard work is paying off.

The evidence is all around us.

One year ago, the public safety of our city was compromised.

For years, an attempt had been underway to co-opt the people's police department, rendering this once-proud institution little more than an isolated 'king's army.'

Leadership was severely out of touch with the officers trying to do their job...leaving hundreds of frustrated hard-working police officers thirsty for leadership.

Police officers were clustered in a large, centralized office building, far away from those they were assigned to protect.

Crime fighting was compromised.

In the past 12 months, we have changed that. Working with Chief Esserman and the members of his department, we made community policing *real*.

We opened eight new neighborhood substations, sending police officers back into the communities they serve.

Not long ago, we graduated 31 cadets from our entirely revamped and improved Police Academy.

These newly minted officers are armed with the same tools of crime fighting that have become the hallmark of today's Providence Police Department: a badge, a gun, plenty of courage.... and a comfortable pair of walking shoes.

Each of these police officers is walking a beat in the neighborhoods of our City.

And with the coldest winter in 100 years, I won't be surprised if the newest demand in the upcoming contract talks, is city-issued long johns and ear muffs.

On a serious note they are doing a GREAT job, and I want to take a minute and ask you to join me in saluting them.

These officers are walking the streets and sidewalks getting to know people, becoming a part of the community, learning their profession in the best possible way and earning their place in *Our Changing City*.

By all of these measures, we are creating a safer city.

How do we know it's working?

We know it's working because people tell me how excited they are to have met their local police officer, how much they enjoy knowing who they are, and seeing them in their neighborhood, week after week.

We know because police officers are reporting the warm receptions they receive, and they're getting better and faster help from citizens when a problem arises.

We know because supervising officers are reporting higher morale throughout the force.

And we know because here in Providence, in a single year of work, we have achieved a double-digit drop in crime. We are a safer city now than we were a year ago.

Despite this heartening progress, our work is far from finished. To make our neighborhoods safer, we will build upon the efforts that are now under way:

- Modernizing our Police Department through new training and technology
- Aggressively pursuing prosecutions through partnerships with the RI Attorney General and the US Attorney.
- Reaching out to the at risk youth of our City through the newly instituted Streetworker program, preventing gang activity and youth violence by providing young people with positive alternatives
- Enhancing police efforts through historic partnerships with clergy and other community leaders

Above all else, we will continue our work to keep the peace, but at the same time, we recognize that one of the best ways to fight crime is to invest in our young people.

The heart of any city's commitment to young people is its stewardship of the public school system.

Last year, when I took office, I vowed to do all I could to help raise the academic achievement of our children, and improve the overall condition of our schools.

Working with our terrific Superintendent Dr. Melody Johnson, our dedicated School Board, our teachers, our parents and a large team of community partners, we have undertaken many new enterprises.

We sought out and appointed experienced and capable civic leaders to serve on the School Board.

We attracted a diverse and talented pool of new school administrators.

We built two new high schools and re-organized others to create smaller learning communities, so that young people are taught by adults who know them well, and who challenge them to do their best.

We created a new K-8 math curriculum.

We provided teachers additional opportunities for professional development...

We trained a cadre of aspiring principals, and

We were selected as the only city in America to receive a grant from the Wallace Foundation to create a comprehensive, citywide after-school initiative for our young people.

All of these measures are helping our children excel in school.

How do we know it's working?

This year, student achievement improved in ALL 53 Providence schools. We saw gains in 51 of our schools for writing, 30 posted significant improvements in reading and 40 showed progress in mathematics.

Let me repeat this: This year, student achievement improved in ALL 53 Providence schools.

Two years ago, students in the city's high schools met an average of 5 targets on the state test. This year, we nearly tripled that figure, to 13 targets.

Just as important, our schools are safer, more supportive, more positive and affirming places. What does that mean? . . . more learning, less bullying, and fewer student expulsions.

This is due in large part to all of our great teachers. I have visited more than 200 classrooms over the past year, and let me tell you: I have met teachers who make MY job look easy.

Every one of us here today owes a debt of gratitude to a great teacher, and I am confident that in today's classrooms, tomorrow's city leaders are being challenged and inspired by a Providence teacher.

On their behalf....on our behalf,... thank you.

As encouraged as I am by these improvements, there is much more work to be done.

- We will insist our teachers receive the professional development they deserve to perform one of the most important jobs in our city – educating our children...
- We will conduct a school by school building review, basement to roof top, and will invest in improving these buildings that have gone too long without maintenance and repair.

I'll have more to say about that in the weeks ahead.

- We will re-organize more of the city's high schools to provide students with smaller learning communities in which they can receive additional attention and support.
- We will formally launch the Providence After School Alliance, a new citywide partnership for ensuring the success of young people by engaging them in high quality after school activities, everything from karate to science clubs to sailing.

This will enable us to begin to implement my vision for citywide community schools.

These next stages of school improvement will not be easy, and they will not happen overnight.

But the students and parents I talk to are heartened by the changes we have made, and confident about where we're headed.

Good schools are a necessary ingredient of a livable, vibrant city; and again, in this area, while we have a lot more to do, we are well on our way.

Nowhere is the optimism about the city's current course more apparent than in the area of economic development.

A year ago, business leaders in Providence fretted about a shrinking tax base, and decried the lack of an ethical or financial compass guiding City Hall.

Developers and corporate leaders eyeing investment opportunities in the northeast saw lots to like in Providence, but plenty of reason to be wary.

We needed to restore confidence, unlock the gears of City departments that had slowed to a crawl, and put the word out that Providence city government is honest, efficient, and predictable.

And we had to do it fast.

This, ladies and gentleman, is exactly what we have done.

This year, in strong partnership with the Governor, Leaders of the General Assembly, and members of the City Council, we led the city's effort to

secure a long-term commitment from GTECH to build its new world headquarters right here in downtown Providence.

This is the first major office building built in Providence in more than a dozen years.

When finished, 750 employees will work here, eat here, and in many cases, live here as well. Over the long term, it will generate millions of dollars in revenue for the city.

Again, working with my colleagues on the City Council, I helped architect the stunning transformation of Rising Sun Mills *that will turn* a complex of brownfields and vacant mills into lofts, software labs, and the high tech corporate headquarters of an innovator in computer aided engineering.

This renovation of a 300,000 square foot mill complex is bringing jobs, new employers, new residents, and a new economic pulse to the Valley and Olneyville neighborhoods.

We are also laying the groundwork for investment in our neighborhoods through the Neighborhood Investment Project.

Residents of every neighborhood are working with the city's Planning Department to craft detailed, neighborhood-by-neighborhood investment strategies for economic growth and community building.

Finally, we created the Providence Economic Development Partnership, whose sole focus is the development of new collaborations to grow the Providence economy and expand our tax base, with a specific emphasis on small businesses in our neighborhoods.

How do we know our economic development efforts are working?

In Providence today, there is more than *One Billion Dollars* in new public and private investment underway...

Entrepreneurs with successful young companies are choosing Providence so that their employees can enjoy our arts, our culture, our rivers, *and* our neighborhoods.

Knowledgeable observers report the highest levels of investor interest in recent history. One local developer told me. "I've had more calls about investment in Providence in the past ten months than I had in the previous ten years!"

And last week's news of the purchase of the Providence Place Mall by the Rouse Company drives that point home.

These are developers that are known around the country for their signature properties, including Boston's Faneuil Hall, and the famous Inner Harbor in Baltimore.

Soon, this company will have an imposing footprint in our extraordinary City.

- To ensure that this resurgence of interest and enthusiasm continues, we will: aggressively seek out new businesses and real estate projects, working with entrepreneurs, investors and developers from across New England and the nation
- We will assist developers as cranes rise up in Capital Center and bulldozers clear the way for the construction of three new hotels in 2004, the first such construction in years.
- We will attack the problem of vacant and abandoned buildings in city neighborhoods.
Working together with our city departments we will reclaim, rehabilitate and return to use, acres of real estate that can once more contribute to the stability and growth of our neighborhoods.

There is nothing more important to the economic development of our city than the quality of life in our neighborhoods.

Shortly, we will unveil a set of new programs that will address the critical need of affordable housing and first-time home ownership in the neighborhoods of our city.

At the same time, our new department of Art, Culture, & Tourism, working with the Parks and Recreation Departments, will bring exciting, new programs to our neighborhood parks.

Finally, our newly created Department of Senior Services will continue its work to enrich the lives of our seniors through a number of new initiatives including plans to provide internet access in each of our 40 senior high-rises.

It is no secret to anyone here that there is one challenge that can either assure that our progress continues, or render us incapable of further action.

That one challenge is money.

None of my tasks is more important than the responsible stewardship of the city's finances.

As soon as we arrived, we took stock, and took action. I directed my Chief of Administration, John Simmons, to oversee an intensive review of the city's finances.

Armed for the first time with good information about Providence's fiscal condition, we dug deep.

We made substantial cuts in management, including a 14% reduction in staff, imposed a wage freeze, a health care plan redesign, and introduced a health care premium co-payment.

We developed a system, to measure performance and outcomes in city government. It holds us accountable and help search taxpayer dollar deliver better results and services... it's called *ProvStat* and it's really making a difference.

We successfully pursued the governor and legislature to provide supplemental educational aid to our city.

We closed a \$60 million budget gap, balanced the budget, and developed a five-year financial plan to insure stability and fiscal health going forward.

At the same time, with some changes in portfolio management, we oversaw the best performance of the city's pension fund in memory -- a 30% return -- outperforming the pension funds of the State of Rhode Island and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

We did another remarkable thing this year.

Last June, after four months of negotiation, I signed the first multi-college payment in lieu of taxes agreement in the country.

Through this twenty-year VOLUNTARY agreement, Providence's four private colleges and universities pledged nearly 50 million dollars, in direct payments to the City of Providence, contributing to the long-term financial health of our city.

Last year's successes serve as an excellent foundation for the ambitious financial reforms we will undertake in 2004.

As the steward of your city's finances:

- I will lead the effort to secure property tax relief for city residents by proposing legislation that will either adjust the current formula for homestead and other exemptions, or create two separate tax classifications.
- I, along with other Mayors and town administrators, will present to the General Assembly legislation that creates a fair, stable, and equitable school funding formula --- an issue that has been ignored for far too long at the expense of our children.

Expect more on this from my colleagues and me as the legislative session unfolds.

This year, Providence will experience a tension between two important goals.

On the one hand, as a City, we will seek to maintain our historic commitment to a fairly compensated work force.

On the other hand, we will continue to make prudent financial decisions at every stage of our work, including impending contract negotiations.

There is no easy reconciliation of these competing interests... no easy answers.

This work will be especially difficult because it involves our most valued employees, like our heroic firefighters that put their lives on the line

everyday protecting us and thousands of other city workers who carry out the important functions of government every single day...

I plan to work my hardest to arrive at fair, affordable, and effective contracts with the workers of the city and their unions. This is the right thing to do.

At the same time, I remain committed to the prudent financial management of our city.

The success of all the major innovations we pursue – better public safety, stronger schools, accelerating economic development – hinge on our growing credibility and reputation as a disciplined city government, one that stewards its resources wisely, and does not shy away from hard decisions.

When we complete our work, we will have fair and sustainable contracts that benefit the city in measurable ways, serving the long-term best interests of all Providence employees and residents....

And we will raise the awareness of the people of the city, the state, and the nation that Providence is moving in the right direction, finding common ground where others often cannot.

Without question, the City of Providence is now on more solid financial footing. But even as we get our financial house in order, without leadership that is both ethical and honest, we would remain on shaky ground.

We've all heard the stories – the zoning applications ushered through based on who you know, not when you applied, the intimidation, the shady dealings.

Together with my exceptional team and hundreds of willing and able city workers, we took on the problem head on.

We undertook a review of ethics procedures throughout the country, found the best practices, and will shortly bring before the City Council a proposal for a new Code of Ethics for the City of Providence.

We opened up the hiring process, and reached out to fill vacancies with outstanding and diverse candidates.

We changed the way the city does its business.

Contract information - once reserved for a privileged few - is now available to the entire public on-line for the first time ever, bringing the bid process into the light of day.

We abolished the city tow list and replaced it with a system that is fair and open.

We are leading by example, and involving new partners, new allies, and new leaders from every sector in moving the City forward.

We are working to make the residents as proud of their City government as they are of their great City.

I have met and learned from hundreds of city workers who over the past twelve months have contributed to this more responsive, efficient, and effective city government.

For those of you who are here today, THANK YOU! You have put your hearts into the effort to make this happen, and I salute you.

I am proud because, together with so many concerned and generous citizens and partners, we have accomplished such great things:

- We are reducing the level of crime in the city.
- We are educating our students more successfully, and actively investing in their development.
- We are attracting and engaging developers and employers who are building new office buildings, hotels, and housing.
- We are stimulating genuine renewal and revitalization of our neighborhoods.
- We are running an ethical, fiscally responsible, and increasingly efficient city government.

That is not to say now is the time for us to all take a bow, put our feet up, and declare victory. Make no mistake— the road ahead is filled with challenges.

We must weather an unpredictable economy, looking for opportunities to continue moving Providence forward and growing our tax base.

We must come through a period of difficult and demanding contract negotiations and decision-making, with no easy solutions.

We must address head on the unmet needs in housing, education, and economic self-sufficiency for many of our newest and most vulnerable City residents.

And we must work as hard as we know how to attract and engage all those who can be our allies in this work.

But if the past year has taught us anything, it is this: Every action of the people of this city and its government has a consequence...

Every crime we prevent opens a door, freeing a parent to let their child play in the local schoolyard, or a student to walk safely through her neighborhood to her favorite after school program.

Every youth we help to make a positive life choice becomes a person who is able to give back to his community as a student, a mentor, or a new member of the workforce.

Every investment we make in housing or local industry gives hope to a working family, and a brighter future to an entire neighborhood.

Every tree we plant...

Every business we attract...

Every abandoned house we re-inhabit...

Every mill we reclaim from history's waste heap...

Every stretch of fiber-optic cable we lay in the ancient offices of City Hall...

Every fair and affordable contract we negotiate on behalf of the city's taxpayers...

Every City worker who takes pride in serving others and solving problems...

Each and every act we take – as a city government and as individual public servants – is connected to our larger, shared future.

Those steps, taken day in, day out, are transforming what we could once only imagine into what we can now achieve.

In the year ahead I look forward to your continued energy, ideas, and good counsel.

Most of all, I look forward to addressing you again in a year's time with even better news, even more promise, and even less space and distance between where we are and where we are going together.

Know this:

Providence is well on its way to becoming the most livable city in America.

Thank you.