



State of the City Address 2005

February 9, 2005

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

Distinguished Members of the General Assembly, Distinguished Members of the City Council, honored guests, ladies and gentlemen,

I am extremely honored to stand before you this evening. I am honored to be leading the City of Providence at a defining moment in our history.

Two years ago, you elected me to reform a city government that had lost its way, and to make it worthy of you again. Today, I am proud to report that city government is not only back on track, but it is leaner, smarter, and stronger than ever. Girder by girder, rivet by rivet, we have constructed a new foundation on which the Providence of our future can grow. And now, in a real way, our city is poised for greatness.

We did not reach this enviable position through the efforts of any one individual or distinct group. We are here because of who we are collectively

-- because of the ironclad character of the people of Providence. We are here because we were tough enough to stare down a long era of difficulty, and we were creative enough to breathe new life into a stately shell that was decaying from within. We are here because of a will and a faith that were kept alive in the strong families of our twenty-five neighborhoods. It is character that has brought us to this defining moment, and it is character that will allow us to reach out for greatness.

I believe we live in a time when becoming great is more than an opportunity. It is a requirement. We are on the cusp of a new era and we will either leap ahead or get left behind. The stakes are high and we are “all in.”

If our character proves strong enough, the City of Providence can become the jewel of the Northeast. It can become America’s first metropolis on a human scale -- a cultural and economic force with a personal face. It can be an incubator for the kinds of ideas and innovations that boost economies into the next dimension, yet still be a city of neighborhoods and of families that go back generations. It can be both a hub of opportunity and haven of livability.

But if we are unable to make ourselves great as a city, it will be very difficult to overcome the powerful obstacles in our path. Global economic change is a heartless business. It opens some doors but slams others shut without regard for who’s behind them. Across the country these changes have eliminated many high paying jobs. Meanwhile the cost of living creeps higher and higher.

It has contributed to a growing economic divide -- one that has been greatly accelerated by federal policy over the last four years. The Republican leadership in Washington has stacked the deck for the wealthiest and created enormous deficits.

Already the universally acclaimed Community Development Block Grant Program that is such an important tool in strengthening our neighborhoods is being gutted, and certainly urban centers can expect fewer and fewer resources in return for the taxes we provide to the federal government.

At the state level, we continue to be hamstrung by an antiquated revenue system that places far too heavy a burden on property taxes. The cost of owning or renting a home or a place of business is already pushing the limits of affordability. Every city and town is buckling under this weight and it is holding back needed investment in schools and infrastructure.

The obstacles are formidable. But we have built the foundation to win in this high stakes environment.

Every day, when I am out in the neighborhoods of our great city, I often speak enthusiastically about our accomplishments in making city government more transparent and accountable. Frankly, the subject does not get crowds standing on their feet. But leaving it out of the public discussion

would be a little like talking about a new sports car without mentioning the engine. Making government open and predictable is not just important, it is among my administration's most significant achievements to date.

All it means is that we take a hard, cold-eyed accounting of what we spend and what it buys us, and then tell people about it. It sounds simple enough, but it's not. It is uncommon because, as we all know, self-assessment can be difficult. It means stepping on the scale every day – not just after a month of exercising, but after Thanksgiving too. It means opening yourself to criticism and blame, and we politicians don't like to do that very much.

But creating an open environment is well worth it in the long run. It buys you the ability to grade and guide yourself. But even more importantly, it buys you trust. And that, you really can't put a price on. I believe we are already seeing the fruits of restored trust in city government.

I believe it was trust that allowed the teacher's union to sit across the bargaining table from us earlier this year and negotiate our historic, 21st century professional contract. It includes a first-ever co-pay for health insurance, it improves professional development, and it allows for a longer school day. We respect them for being the professionals that they are and doing their part for our children.

I believe it was trust that allowed Local 1033, the labor union for many of our city workers, to spend long hours with my team to hammer out a modern contract that rewards their dedication and acknowledges the constraints of Providence taxpayers. I thank them for their professionalism as well.

Just the last week we finalized contracts with crossing guards and school clerks that recognize their important work and also capture savings through health care co-pays and restructuring.

We are working hard to reach 21st century, professional contracts with our police officers and fire fighters as well.

I believe it was also trust that helped to inspire the Wallace Foundation to invest an incredibly generous 5 million dollars – and Bank of America one million dollars – in the Providence After School Alliance. This initiative will do no less than change the way Providence cares for its kids.

The difference in time between the work day and the school day has long been a source of worry for parents, and it has been a lost educational opportunity for our kids. This groundbreaking program will provide new opportunities by focusing on three key strategies. It will help to make existing programs better. It will allow the ten city recreation centers to offer a much richer array of choices. And, perhaps most importantly, it will create a system of neighborhood hubs to ensure that families in each community have access to programming that fits the needs of their own kids.

Beyond the trust that is growing among the parties that make city government run, there is a restored trust in the city from out-of-state investors. Developers and CEOs representing large, nationally recognized

companies are looking at Providence with a new eye, and are liking what they see.

It was not surprising when I meet with prospective investors in our city to learn of the level of uneasiness with which they had approached Providence in the past. They saw potential, but they also saw potential shenanigans. I believe making city government more transparent has already ushered in the beginning of a “trust dividend” that is changing the face of the Providence economy.

Gtech is an excellent example of this. In December Gtech began construction on its new World Headquarters - square in the center of our downtown neighborhood. It is the first office building to be built in Providence in 16 years. It will be home to 500 Gtech employees. Over the course of 20 years it will generate in excess of \$20 million in new taxes for the City of Providence.

All over downtown there is the activity of building and growth. Cranes hoisting. Backhoes digging. Construction workers with good jobs building permanent legacies of bricks and concrete and stone. Yes, it can make driving downtown a little tricky, and those of us who work here know it can get noisy, but I’ll tell you -- it is music to my ears. It is the rhapsody of opportunity. It is the sound of soundness and security for the next generation.

If you haven't strolled down Westminster Street in a while, I invite you to treat yourself to a sneak preview of the future of downtown Providence. In just twelve months, nine businesses have opened shop there.

And just as exciting as the sheer economic impact is the quality and diversity of the new neighbors.

At 275 is Afferent Corporation, a biomedical company that makes devices to cure neurological disorders. Down the street is the beautiful new Hotel Providence. Close by are the Providence Black Rep's new Xxodus Café, and the chic furniture maker, Design Within Reach.

This renewed sense of trust is pumping new vitality into the economy, it is bringing neighbors together and restoring pride of place.

That kind of trust is due in part to the truly remarkable work of the men and women of the Providence Police force working diligently to keep our streets safe and who are building strong relationships with the residents of our city. I applaud them for their outstanding work.

In many ways, their success with community policing is both the best example of, and model for, everything we are trying to do in this city. It is an innovative but common sense solution to an old problem, and it successfully breaks down barriers between people and their city government.

For the second year in a row we have reduced the rate of violent crime by double digits. North of us, in Boston, violent crime went up, South of us, in

New Haven, violent crime went up. But here in Providence it went *down* 11%. Last year crime went down in every single category.

Much of the credit for this astonishing achievement of course goes to our esteemed chief, Colonel Dean Esserman. Chief Esserman has a keen understanding of the relationship between good policy and low crime, and I will continue to rely on his expertise.

We know where we stand as a city and we are strengthening the bonds of trust. These are fundamental components of a culture of greatness. But knowing where we are is only important if we know where we want to go. We needed a roadmap. We needed a strategy that doesn't change with the shifting political winds or personnel in charge of making it happen.

Through an innovative and exhaustive process that brought every City department together on two separate occasions, we have developed just that. It is called the Mayor's Roadmap for a Greater Providence and it is already serving as the playbook for every city worker.

It is organized according to the five priorities I set upon taking office. Your priorities: strong neighborhoods, high quality education, public safety, economic growth, and fiscal integrity.

The Roadmap is about delivering. It is the delivery system for the things you expect and deserve from your city government.

It is about making sure that every taxpayer dollar that goes in is transformed into maximum value. It is faster snow removal after a blizzard. It is quicker identification of road hazards. It's a smarter and more comprehensive response to things like graffiti and rodent problems. It's a more enjoyable neighborhood park and a more exciting summer arts program.

The Roadmap is all those things, but it also spells out my strategy for helping to turn the tide on larger challenges. One of the largest of these is the City's affordable housing crisis. A lack of a decent housing is poison for our families and our economy. It robs people of the ability to nurture their loved ones and themselves. Having good homes for working people is fundamental to any economy in any community, and we can't accept further erosion of that foundation.

Through a variety of programs and partnerships, we are working to match hundreds of families and individuals with the affordable homes they need. We are approaching the issue from all sides by developing new homes, restoring old ones, providing down payment and loan assistance, and bolstering assisted living for our seniors.

While government must certainly provide a safety net, it cannot serve as a replacement for a dynamic, broad-based economy in creating real opportunities and improved livelihoods. That only comes when wealth and

resources flow through a complex and interdependent network of hard working, innovative people.

But we will not sit on our hands and wait for the economy to become more diverse and inclusive. Government can and must provide vision, leadership, refereeing, salesmanship, and stimulus – and we’re doing all of that.

An exciting vision is taking shape around the future economy in the City of Providence. It is an economy whose success will not only be judged by traditional measures such as jobs generated and dollars invested, but also by quality of life. We will not only read about it in the business section, but we will also feel it where we live.

To achieve this vision, we must recognize that growing our economy and strengthening our neighborhoods are two sides of the same coin. They must move forward hand in hand. We are already seeing the transformation of our downtown into a neighborhood, and we will soon see our neighborhoods transform into local economic engines.

If you run a catering business in the North End, we want to help you. If you own a service station in Elmwood we want to help you improve. And if you own a graphic design shop in Silver Lake we want to help you expand.

Every month over the course of the next year, as I have in recent months, I am going to visit a successful business in one of our neighborhoods. Joined by Don Eversley, the President of the Providence Economic Development

Partnership, I hope to both showcase their successes and learn how the city can support their continued prosperity.

In the meantime we will continue to work hard to stimulate opportunity and enhance quality of life in every way we can.

I am pleased to announce that we will be rolling out an exciting new program called CommerceDirect. It makes available loans of up to \$25,000 to small businesses, and decreases the amount of red tape involved in getting approved. You can learn more about it at the brand new PEDP website, providenceri.biz.

In the coming days, Parks Superintendent Alix Ogden will be presenting her plan to reorganize the Parks Department in keeping with my challenge to make it more focused on neighborhood parks. Roger Williams Park will remain the Department's showcase, but neighborhood parks must receive equal attention.

I am also pleased to announce the coming of the Main Street Investment Program. It expands successful strategies in Olneyville and Broad Street to each of Providence's eight commercial districts. This targeted injection of capital will result in the revitalization of each commercial district to give itself a face-lift and preserves each neighborhood's unique character. It's a small investment that goes a long way to improve commerce and quality of life.

In November, we began our pilot program for semi-automated trash pickup. 400 Olneyville residents are participating in a pilot program that's resulting in cleaner streets and quicker pick-up.

Once they say its ready for prime time, we will begin a citywide rollout.

Fundamental to economic development and quality of life are good, safe roads. This winter has been among the snowiest on record, but through the leadership of Director of Public Works John Nikelson and his capable team, we have kept roads open and clear.

We're also submitting legislation to fix a totally irrational state system for funding road maintenance and repair. Well-traveled roads like Reservoir Avenue and Douglas Avenue are classified by the state as major arteries. In many towns, such as Barrington and East Greenwich, the state is responsible for repairing and maintaining all of these roads. One hundred percent. In Providence it's a different story. Providence taxpayers cover the cost of 60% of our major arteries. In fact, above the Cranston line, Reservoir Avenue is maintained by the state. Once it hits Providence, you pay for it. It simply doesn't make sense.

Other legislation we propose seeks to establish a Municipal Economic Development zone, or "MED," zone in the city. The MED zone is another tool that allows us to use targeted tax incentives to encourage new development in areas that need it most.

In the coming weeks I will be hosting four evening events in the north, south, east and west sides of Providence.

We're calling it the State of the City in Your Neighborhood. I will be joined by key members of my cabinet and staff to talk with more focus about the future of our neighborhoods. Dates and times will be posted to our Web site at the end of the week.

Now I want to ask you to consider something. Every once in a while the news of the world reminds us of the genius of our own democracy -- a bloody coup, the jailing of a political dissident... For that moment we are forced to reflect in awe at our own system of government, and at our constitution and Bill of Rights and their power to preserve peace and freedom. These are the cornerstones of our way of life.

But tonight I want ask you to consider another pillar of the American Way that equally deserves our wonder and appreciation, but rarely gets it. That is our system of public education.

It is at once radically generous and deeply wise. It's the greatest gift we can bestow on a child and the best investment we can make because we know that the cost of not preparing a child to compete in the economy and realize their potential is much higher than the cost of doing it.

A child immigrant from Central America who doesn't speak a word of English. A child with a special gift in the arts or in science.

A child with a learning disability. Our schools make a place for all of these children. And it is possible because we all decide to make it so. The citizens of Providence say: "Here is my hard earned money. Give a child an opportunity to realize her potential and contribute to our future."

You deserve a tremendous amount of appreciation for that.

Being the steward of that investment is an awesome responsibility. And I am very proud of the progress that has been made over the last two years.

There are two bottom lines in education -- the achievement bottom line and the financial bottom line. In both cases, the Providence Schools are looking better and better.

As has been widely reported, our test scores are rising across the board. A growing number of our schools can compete with expensive private schools for top students – especially in the lower grades. And we believe that in the years ahead more and more private and parochial school parents will take a long look at the Providence Schools option – not for the affordability, but for the quality.

What have been less publicized are the major strides on the financial side. In addition to the progressive teachers contract I mentioned earlier, we have

become one of the most financially efficient urban school districts in New England.

Two recent studies have shown that a dollar invested in our schools goes a great deal farther than in many of our peer city school systems. We have organized ourselves to move a huge percentage of money directly to the classroom, with an extremely lean and efficient central administrative office.

I applaud our students, teachers, principals, and administrators for their excellence under difficult circumstances. I especially want to thank our masterful superintendent, Melody Johnson, who works tirelessly for our kids despite having perhaps the most difficult job in city government.

Unfortunately, we will not be able to keep up the pace of school reform unless we also take quick action on property tax reform in Rhode Island and the way we invest in education. The state has acted locally at Hope High School, but it is not acting globally on the larger issue. In Providence and in every city and town in the state, school systems are finding it increasingly difficult to pay for the rising cost of education -- costs that are due in no small part to state and federal mandates. And this is despite the fact that our property taxes are already far too high.

Rhode Islanders rely more heavily on property taxes to fund schools than 48 other states. Only Hawaii is worse. Rhode Islanders need property tax relief now.

Other states are finding innovative solutions to this problem. They are changing the way they look at school investment and viewing it in a more sophisticated way. They are finding ways to assess the cost of educating each child, based on his or her readiness to learn and allocating funds based on those criteria. They are leveraging state economies-of-scale and looking at more progressive methods for raising capital.

Rhode Island can and must do this too. I was extremely disappointed that the Governor's budget presented no new ideas for property tax reform and school funding, despite his assertion that education is one of his administration's top priorities. This is too important an issue to let slide until it becomes a crisis.

In the absence of leadership from the top, I will continue to work with mayors across the state to address this vital matter. However, the minute the Governor wants to discuss ideas for a 21st century school funding system, I will be the first one outside his door. I am confident that Rhode Island will find an answer to this growing problem, but we need to find it soon.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we live in a special place at a special time.

We have laid the foundation for a future without limits. We have built the launching pad for lift-off.

We have won the trust that comes from accountability, transparency, and fiscal integrity.

We are developing a diverse, broad-based economy neighborhood by neighborhood.

We are educating our children better and managing our resources with maximum efficiency.

We are poised for greatness. This is the state of our city. We are poised to become the first American breakout city of the 21st century. But the key to that destiny lies in the heart of every Providence resident. It will come down to character.

If we tolerate a system where who you know is more important than what you know we will not realize that destiny.

If we are more concerned about what we are owed than what we can achieve we will not realize that destiny.

If we allow for excuses in place of accountability we will not realize that destiny.

But I know Providence. This is our destiny. Our character has been forged in the fire of adversity and tempered by the strength of our families and

communities. We're ready. Let us step forward together into our unknown, unlimited future.

Thank you.