

Shared Hopes, Common Concerns

State of the City Address

The Honorable David Cicilline

Providence, Rhode Island -- February 9, 2006

“The greatness of our city lies in the strength of our people and the spirit of community we share.”

-- Mayor Cicilline

Introduction: A Great City

Distinguished members of the General Assembly. Honorable members of the City Council. Honored guests. Ladies and gentlemen:

Before we begin, I would like to ask you to join me in a moment of silence in memory of Detective Sergeant Jimmy Allen, who died in the service of our city on April 17th.

Thank you.

In thinking about this year’s State of the City I asked myself what qualities, what accomplishments, make a city great. Cities are living, breathing barometers of our economic, social, and cultural progress as a nation. When they work well, they are super-powerful magnets for new businesses and good jobs -- burgeoning incubators for creativity and innovation. Cities are the intellectual as well as social and economic centers of our society.

It is a great city when government works efficiently; when departments and agencies are transformed, modernized, and professionalized; when leadership is trusted and the functions of government are transparent – it’s a great city.

It’s a great city when schools are in the hands of creative educators like Dr. Donnie Evans who are committed to innovative concepts like “whole school effectiveness.” It’s a great city when you can boast of a citywide system of

AfterZones, a national model for after school programs; and it's a great city when you have an extraordinary success story like the amazing transformation of Hope High School that is an inspiration to us all.

It's a great city when streets and parks are cleaner and safer than they have been in years; when neighborhood streets are better maintained, lines are painted, and roads are repaired; when the garbage is collected and neighbors have a Big Green Can to put out at the curb – it's a great city.

It's a great city when more and more decent affordable housing is becoming available every year.

It's a great city when you're named in national publications as a top community in which to do business, a top community for young people, *and* a top community for the arts.

It's a great city that can shed a decades-old reputation for having a business climate that was only friendly to a small number of insiders, and then gets rewarded with 3 billion dollars in new investment;

When the major rating agencies recognize the city's restored financial condition and give us higher grades;

When world renowned hospitals and institutions of higher learning collaborate with the government in partnerships that serve the community as a whole – it's a great city.

It's a great city when we do all we can to secure our ports and our infrastructure against the new threats we face from terrorism and old threats like LNG tankers sailing into the port of Providence.

It's a great city that brings neighborhood entrepreneurs together to spruce up and market their local business districts; when we plant miles of street trees, add welcome signs, and organize merchants associations.

It's a great city when the arts are alive, accessible, and free in our neighborhoods all summer long, and great restaurants are making our downtown one of America's premier food-destinations;

When Trinity, PPAC, Black Rep, Perishable Theater, AS220 and so many others offer award winning performances and thousands come from miles around to experience the Waterfire phenomenon – it's a great city.

It's a great city when the mainstay of our hopes and aspirations for a better life for every family is the rich diversity and heritage of our neighborhoods; when a city is founded on the principles of acceptance and inclusiveness.

And even though we may not yet have escaped the horrors of gun violence -- It's a great city when the overall crime rate is down for the third consecutive year.

When the police department is professional and well-equipped with state-of-the-art technologies—

When more and more police officers and neighbors work together to keep each other safe—

My friends, it is truly a great city when thousands of concerned citizens come forward – as they have in recent weeks -- to offer their prayers for the recovery of Chief Esserman.

Tonight I am happy to report that the Chief is out of surgery. I visited him today. His doctors tell me he is doing very well and his prognosis is excellent.

Our thoughts and prayers for his speedy recovery are with Dean, Gilda and their children, Nellie, Sam, and Rolando tonight.

The Image of Government

For all of the reasons I have mentioned, Providence is a great city. We are at our best when we stand shoulder-to-shoulder -- neighbor-to-neighbor – in solidarity, for in the end, the greatness of our city lies in the strength of our people and the spirit of community we share.

Make no mistake, the State of this City is more optimistic, dynamic, prosperous, and hopeful today than it has been in decades.

We are the social, cultural, and economic center of this state, justifiably proud of our diversity and united by our shared hopes and common concerns.

One of those concerns when I came into office was the tarnished image of City government.

I have said before, and I will say again, we are changing that image for the better. You can't hold good government in your hands – but good governance matters because, when government is honest and competent, contracts are more affordable, personnel is more professional, and service is improved.

Just a few years ago, when you walked into the Recorder of Deeds office, you waited for as long as it took for someone to navigate the bowels of City Hall and find your documents in archives stuffed with decades of decaying paperwork. Now it is all electronic. A scanned document is called up instantly and the whole process takes a matter of minutes.

A web site that puts more and more city services at your fingertips and means fewer lunch hours spent on errands to City offices--

A Big Green Can with a lid to starve rats out of the neighborhood—

It's good government in action and it makes a difference.

When my grandfather went to work for the State many years ago he did so with a profound sense of duty. He believed that honest, fair government held an important place in people's lives. He was proud of his job. He would brag that he worked for the State. We need to remember those times. We need to value the role of government again and respect those who teach our children, plow our streets, and keep this city safe and secure. I am extremely gratified that we are restoring my grandfather's sense of pride in public service to every city department and agency and making public service a noble profession again.

Our city workers are proving the cynics wrong. They are showing that, when given the opportunity, they are just as proud and professional as their private sector counterparts. They are embracing new customer service training programs, and adopting a healthy spirit of competition. They are working as teams, each seeking to show that they're the best snow plowers; or park maintainers; or that their department has the most improved ProvStat data. They're not working on behalf of a political agenda. They're working on behalf of their neighbors, and they're working hard.

We have come a long way in changing the image of City government since I took office, but there is one important thing that remains. We have come this far to restore the image of the City. Let's not rest until the job is done.

Tonight I ask the Honorable members of the Providence City Council to join me in completing the the work of my Ethics Task Force by passing the Ethics ordinance as soon as possible. Let us seize the moment, the people of Providence deserve no less. Let's come together to pass the Ethics Ordinance now.

The Realities We Face

Having said that, we must acknowledge that we have other challenges before us in the coming year. We face the same problems every city faces in an expanding global market which places increasing demands on all of us.

But because of a massive federal deficit combined with huge tax cuts, basic programs and services that help cities are in jeopardy once again this year.

Republican policies at the Federal level have amounted to a political sleight-of-hand that has transformed politically expedient federal tax cut programs into destructive property tax increases in nearly every city and town in America.

And at the state level the Governor offers the same approach. Every year -- a decreasing share of school funding from the state. Every year – a little more weight the property tax payer must bear.

Making property taxes the first choice for our revenue base is unfair and ineffective. It negates any economic benefit of tax cuts and stifles the potential for real progress in education, decent affordable housing, attracting new business, and improving our infrastructure. It is a tax where people who make less income usually pay a higher percentage of it, and it is a tax that discourages home ownership. No one can convince me that's good economics.

Neighborhood Accomplishments

Despite the economic challenges we face, we have made steady progress especially in our neighborhoods.

The new investment downtown is visible to everyone. Just outside the window you can see the GTech building near completion, and one of the many cranes that now mark our skyline– this one hoisting the steel for the new Westin addition. But the 3 billion in investment is not limited to the downtown. The boom is everywhere.

Look around this room. You will see, on the walls, photographs of some of the billion-plus dollars of brick and mortar investment in neighborhood projects that are underway.

17 million dollars of affordable housing in Elmwood

A new 70-room hotel on Federal Hill

Innovative mixed-use developments and housing throughout Upper South Providence.

A 136 million dollar mix of affordable and market rate housing with commercial developments in Olneyville.

And the list goes on and on.

But beyond these brick and mortar projects, every City department is increasing its effort to revitalize and strengthen the neighborhoods of Providence.

From schools to parks to recreation centers to housing we have been able to preserve the best of the past while welcoming every opportunity to embrace the future, harness the latest technological advancements, strengthen our infrastructure and our security, clean up our streets and our neighborhoods and keep moving forward.

We are making quality affordable housing a city-wide priority. We have created about 450 new affordable housing units in Providence and we are developing new units at 6 times the rate of production in the 1990s.

We have forged productive partnerships with Rhode Island Housing and with our local Community Development Corporations and in the coming weeks I will release our next 5-year plan to Create, Preserve, and Revitalize affordable housing in our City.

I'm pleased tonight to acknowledge Candido Rodriguez, who, through the help of the City and West Elmwood Development Corporation, is one of our most recent homeowners living on the South Side. Through our HOME program we were able to help Candido with a 35 thousand dollar subsidy and also offer a low interest loan to help with the down payment. Congratulations on your new home,

Candido. We couldn't be happier that you have decided to buy a stake in Providence.

When it comes to services for seniors, we are helping them keep their homes through the Senior Tax Opportunity Program.

There are new Outreach Education Programs to bring seniors together with those who can answer their questions about health care, prescription drugs, Medicare Part D and options for coverage eligibility.

The Department of Senior Services and the Police Department have partnered in a 24 hour emergency response system for seniors that is a model for a statewide system to help respond to the needs of seniors in every community.

The Neighborhood Markets Program I mentioned is improving the overall quality of life in local business districts. Citywide we are providing technical assistance as well as grants and low-interest loans to help build a stronger, more positive identity for merchants and our neighborhood business districts.

And in a year when the nation watched in horror as the neighborhoods of a great American city were wiped out by a hurricane, we felt a measure of relief in knowing that we have made preparedness a major priority. We have conducted major drills at our port and our mall. We have worked with our federal delegation to capture funding for an emergency operations center, a reverse 911 system, emergency training, and much more. The hurricane barrier has been modernized and tested.

When it comes to public art and cultural programs, we have funded dozens of successful art events downtown and in the neighborhoods: Celebrate Providence!, our Neighborhood Performing Arts Initiative; Providence Sound Session; First Works Providence International Arts Festival; First Works Kids; The Summer Concert Series at Waterplace Park; and Bright Night Providence.

Through the policies and planning of the Department of Arts, Culture, and Tourism, we have made Providence's neighborhoods and our downtown one of the most significant cultural destinations in the East.

We've expanded the Arts and Entertainment District beyond downtown and into other neighborhoods of the City. We're becoming a city of star sightings as major studios are finding Providence an extremely production-friendly place for projects like: Showtime's *the Brotherhood*, Disney's *Underdog*, and *Hard Luck* with Wesley Snipes.

Our vibrant arts community has played a major role in our city's revival. It has helped us preserve historic properties, expand our tax base, revitalize our neighborhoods, increase real estate values, and create good-paying jobs. I intend to make sure Providence remains a haven for talented artists who boost our economy and enrich our lives.

Education

I am also pleased to report that in our public schools--the most important buildings in our city neighborhoods--we are now seeing significant progress. It isn't enough and we are not satisfied, but it is significant and it confirms our direction.

In the last three years, students at every level have made steady gains in English Language Arts and Mathematics. This trend indicates solid improvement in student achievement as a direct result of the important investments we have made in Providence Schools.

By now, you all know the new face of the Providence School Department, Dr. Donnie Evans, a respected educator from Tampa, Florida, with an extraordinary record of success.

When Dr. Evans came to Providence, I told him that our schools were heading in the right direction, but we needed to ramp-up our progress. I said, "Donnie, how

do we continue our progress but slam our foot on the accelerator?” He told me about whole school effectiveness, a model that propelled student achievement in Tampa, increasing the number of high performing schools from 7 to 87 on his watch. I said I wanted every school in Providence to be successful—to have effective academic programs, highly qualified teachers, a welcoming and inviting atmosphere where students, staff and parents feel connected to their school and supported by their community.

Dr. Evans looked at me and said, “Mayor, we can do it.” And, ladies and gentlemen, I know we can.

We have had the opportunity to implement some of these new strategies at Hope High School and we are seeing a dramatic transformation there. It goes to show what great principals and teachers can do under the right conditions.

Please join me in recognizing Superintendent Donnie Evans and the three great principals of Hope High School – Dr. Wayne Montague, Scott Sutherland, and Dr. Arthur Petrosinelli.

Every year the importance of education in keeping our city, our state, and our nation competitive in a global market becomes more apparent and more critical.

For that reason, Dr. Evans and I will announce in the coming weeks a strategy to move the district from Rekindling the Dream of education excellence to Realizing the Dream. We have created a Providence model of Whole School Effectiveness that builds upon existing reforms and accelerates our progress.

I would like to highlight five action steps in pursuit of this strategy:

First, as we address the problem of our decaying school buildings, we won't just spend that money to re-create a 19th century model conceived in the Industrial Revolution. We will remake our schools into 21st century learning environments. We will also introduce initiatives for community-based schools and begin to organize our district into Kindergarten through 8th grade neighborhood schools.

Second, we will build on the collaborative and progressive relationship we have formed with the Providence Teachers Union to ensure that every teacher in every school is empowered and supported to be successful in their classroom.

Third, we will guide and support principals along a path to true, instructional leadership and accountability and create a school culture where learning is paramount.

Fourth, we will make a major effort to forge new partnerships and deepen the ones that already exist so that everyone has the opportunity to offer support to Providence kids. Colleges and universities, businesses, hospitals, non-profit and community groups will all join the school community in our common mission.

Fifth, we will further integrate the school district with our AfterZones because parents work in the 21st century and kids need a safe, fun, and enriching place to go after school.

I know we can do it. We will accelerate reform, and we will realize our dream so every child in Providence has the opportunity to realize theirs.

And while I'm on the subject, I'd like to acknowledge some of the Providence kids participating in our AfterZones who are here. Stand up!

This year, my dream of citywide after school opportunities for every middle-school-aged Providence child took its first major step toward becoming fully realized. We have hundreds of kids participating in the Olneyville and Upper South Providence AfterZones with three more to come next year. The Providence After School Alliance is made up of so many great partners who have come together that there are too many to thank, but they know how deeply I appreciate their contributions.

Economic Development

If changing the culture of education is our investment in the future, then economic development is our guarantee that we will have the resources to make that investment.

We're expanding our tax base, growing our economy, creating good jobs. Providence is alive with economic activity: the west end of Westminster Street is coming to life with new retail and restaurants. The Peerless Building is now being occupied. The Providence Fruit and Produce Warehouse will be converted. Eagle Square is thriving.

All of these projects were made possible by the State Historic Tax Credit program. As the General Assembly and others evaluate this program, I urge them to remember all this program has done and can still do to improve our state and our capital city – revitalizing buildings, and reclaiming old derelict and polluted sites.

These projects are proving the naysayers wrong. Economic development is citywide -- no longer confined to Waterplace and the Mall. Major downtown investment is moving west to Promenade, and south – past the Jewelry district to the next frontier of development along Allens Avenue. Soon, the old Route 195 barrier will come down and new waterfront property will create new possibilities for residential, recreational, and retail space that has been lost for generations. The city is growing.

In fact, we are celebrating two major turning points in Providence. First, we recently celebrated the first growth in the city's tax base since 1992. By next fiscal year it is projected to be significantly greater.

Second, the city is now in a position where it no longer needs to offer tax breaks to lure major investment downtown. That is not to say that we don't have to keep hustling to grow our economic engine. We do. But the new taxes generated will

give us the resources we need to plow back into the city so we can build the infrastructure for our future economy.

We are already working with the City Council on legislation that will help the city do exactly that. It will take a portion of the new taxes from a small number of new projects downtown and use that capital for three major functions:

First, to make targeted improvements that will encourage needed private investment on the western edge of downtown and across the highway to connect the Downtown with the West Side. The signature improvement is envisioned to be a wide, Ponte Vecchio-style pedestrian walkway across the highway.

And with the help of RISD president Roger Mandle, we will soon announce the details of an international competition to design that bridge, as it is our obligation to ensure that our new projects stand up to the great architectural beauty passed down to us by our ancestors.

Second, we will make improvements to help ease the parking problems of a growing downtown with new garages, bike-friendly street patterns, and improved bus access.

Third, we will use the opportunity to make more citywide neighborhood investments. We will add five million dollars in new funding to the City's housing trust to increase production of affordable housing. And we will inject significant new funding into the Neighborhood Markets program to support neighborhood business districts.

It's called Tax Incremental Financing, or TIF for short, and it's an innovative way to make needed improvements while encouraging private investment at the same time. It's done wonders in Chicago and it makes sense here too.

While we grow we must understand that growth without foresight and planning isn't growth at all. It's called sprawl. Thankfully, commuting to Providence is

nothing like the waking nightmare it is to Boston and New York, but if we don't plan ahead, that's exactly what it will be.

We are going to need a transit system in Providence and beyond to get people to work on time while cleaning up our roads and the quality of our air.

Now is the time to bring city officials from Providence and neighboring communities together with RIPTA, the Department of Transportation, the Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation, and community and business leaders to peer into the future and imagine the transit system of tomorrow commensurate with our growth.

Therefore, I am announcing tonight the formation of the Transit 2020 Working Group to help us to develop the best, most cost-effective plan to meet the challenges that growth presents to our transit infrastructure.

I am also pleased to announce that I have asked Donna Cupelo, Regional President of Verizon Communications to lead this important group, and she has graciously accepted.

The Road Ahead

It would be unrealistic to assume there will be no obstacles as we seek to expand economic growth and maintain the quality of life we enjoy today. The road ahead is always paved with the best intentions; along the roadside are always a few lost dreams, but there is no doubt in my mind that we are poised to make Providence one of the most extraordinary cities in America.

We have everything in place to make this an even more livable, lively city, respectful of our proud history but boldly willing -- as we have proven in the past -- to move rivers, move highways, tear down walls, redesign, rethink, try new ideas, and build a better future.

Yes, there will be obstacles to overcome. We have, for example, an outstanding contract to resolve with Local 799, our firefighters union. I was disappointed last November when union members, for the third time, rejected a contract that I believe was fair to firefighters and to our city's taxpayers. It was especially disappointing because it was rejected by a difference of only 8 votes out of roughly 500 cast.

Obviously, this has created frustration within the union, in City Hall, and among many residents. But that is exactly why I put a plan in place several months ago for this eventuality, and that is the arbitration process. In the coming weeks, an arbitration panel will issue a decision on four years worth of contracts and set the terms for finalizing the existing contract and those in the future.

This is the path to resolution of this ten year dispute. I am certain of it and nothing will persuade me to stop this arbitration process. We have worked for 3 long years to resolve this dispute through negotiation – that did not work. I am convinced that the accelerated, consolidated arbitration process is the only way to resolve this contract. No amount of personal attacks, protesting, or picketing will cause me to stop the arbitration process.

Conclusion: A Spirit of Community

All of us have a stake in the future. All of us have an obligation to make this city work, to restore confidence in our ability to meet any challenge, put our differences aside, hold to our principles when tested, but be willing to compromise when necessary to sustain the progress we have made together.

Ladies and gentlemen, almost 41 years ago to the day, Lyndon Johnson spoke to Congress on the social unrest in America's cities and he made a profound observation which rings as true today as it did then.

He said: *"The American city should be a collection of communities where every member has a right to belong. It should be a place where every man feels safe*

on his streets and in the house of his friends. It should be a place where each individual's dignity and self respect is strengthened by the respect and affection of his neighbors. It should be a place where each of us can find the satisfaction and warmth which comes from being a member of the community of man. This is what man sought at the dawn of civilization. It is what we seek today."

Let us heed those words. Let us see our diversity as strength, but let us also unite our community around our shared hopes and common concerns.

Let us do all we can to put our differences aside and attend to educating our children, creating jobs, building our tax base, providing decent affordable housing for our families, and keeping our neighborhoods safe and clean.

Let us be fully aware that it is in the strength of community that our individual dignity and self-respect is sustained.

Let each of us strive to be an active member of that community. Let us accept our responsibility -- neighbor-to-neighbor -- and find satisfaction and warmth in the nurturing neighborhoods of the community we call Providence.

All of us have a role to play. All of us have a part. Let us do all we can to make Providence a city in which we can achieve our individual dreams, but let us also understand that our strength comes from each of us working for the good of all of us.

Thank you. Good night. And may God bless our city.