

State of the City Address
Mayor Vincent A. Cianci, Jr.
March 13, 2001

Council President Lombardi, honorable members of the Providence City Council, ladies and gentlemen:

At the dawn of the 21st century, the state of the City of Providence is fundamentally sound.

Compared to other central cities, our economy, our neighborhoods, and our people are remarkably strong and resilient.

A generation of renewal and reconstruction has placed Providence in the forefront of American cities. Providence has joined the select list of “magnet cities” that draw investment, talent and culture from distant points. In the year 2001, the skyline of the city is undergoing constant change. A billion dollars of investment in the Convention Center and Providence Place will soon be followed by half a billion dollars of new commercial development on nearby locations. Property values are also on the rise. The revaluation that we just completed shows a billion-dollar increase in

values over the last 13 years. The South Side and the West End posted some of the biggest percentage gains in the city. This is a strong indication that all neighborhoods are benefiting from the Providence Renaissance.

Two of the most important factors in the health of a city are the safety of its streets and the quality of its public schools. Progress is being made here as well. Over the last four years, the crime rate has been lower than at any other time since the 1970s. The police department, with new leadership, new energy and new determination, is taking

decisive action to maintain public confidence. Colonel Sullivan has made the commitment to seek national accreditation, an exhaustive process that will measure the department against the highest standards of law-enforcement. We are also making a major effort to increase the number of minority police officers. And we are making progress: To date, almost 50% of the applicants to the new police school are minorities. I am also pleased to report that the construction of our new, state-of-the-art public safety headquarters is ahead of schedule.

The School Department, under the leadership of Diana Lam, is instituting a comprehensive strategy of school reform. Few districts in America have attempted the top-to-bottom change now underway in Providence. Teachers, principals and administrators are putting into practice the most progressive new methods for educating our urban population. Providence has become a model district, not only in Rhode Island, but in the nation.

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I was pleased to hear from Diana Lam that the Nathanael Greene Mathematics Team placed first in the Mathcounts competition earlier this month. I'm sure a lot of hard work went into this state competition. Nathanael Greene's coach, Barbara Feldman, and her students should be proud. The students are Laurel Dwyer, Jeremy Estey, Jawon Lee, Yongbok Hwang, Paul Magyar and Matthew Lopes. They are the future of Providence. Let's give them a round of applause.

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The city economy is stronger today than at any other time since the 1950s. Consider the Providence Place Mall. Almost 20 million customers have poured into this new shopping center during its first 18 months of operation. Several tenants in the mall, including Hoyt's Cinema, Cheesecake Factory, and IMAX are among the top performers in their respective companies. Retail employment in Providence is now greater than in Warwick for the first time in almost 15 years.

The huge success of Providence Place is causing a wave of new investment to wash

over Capital Center. A whole skyline of hotels, office buildings, stores and upscale homes is slated to rise on vacant lots close to the mall.

Downcity is also being swept up in the tide of renewal. Downcity is attracting a hundred and twenty-five million dollars of new investment. The Shepard's Building has been completely restored for URI. Johnson & Wales is building a new downtown campus. And handsome old store buildings are being converted into apartment buildings for loft living.

Providence is poised to attract business investment on an even larger scale in the years to come. The growth of the Boston and Providence metro areas is creating a single, vast market with more than five million people. Providence, with its outstanding highway access, is well positioned to serve this enlarged market. Office rents in Boston and Cambridge are currently double and even triple the rents in Providence. Already, investment has begun to flow south.

We are taking numerous steps in Providence to take full advantage of the opportunities:

- First, we will propose that the tangible tax on business property be reduced by almost 50% as of July 1. This will make our business taxes much more competitive in Rhode Island – and the Northeast. The reduction will enable the city to comply with new state statutes regarding local taxes.

- Second, we will offer significant tax breaks to property-owners in Downcity if they agree to substantially rehabilitate their properties. Last year, we sought this authority from the General Assembly.
- Third, we will advocate a flexible policy regarding building height and design in Capital Center. It is important to preserve standards of overall quality. But we should also search for acceptable compromises so that construction can proceed without undue delay.

- Fourth, we will relocate Traveler's Aid, and create a retail/entertainment center on Weybosset Street. We will also create a community theater on Richmond Street. The Weybosset center will include something long sought by Downcity advocates: a parking garage for more than 1,100 cars.
- Fifth, we will work to bring Brown University's new graduate theater program to the arts and entertainment

district. We expect that Trinity Rep will also be a partner in this program.

- Sixth, in the fall of 2002, we will open the new Providence Public School of the Performing Arts at a location in the arts and entertainment district.
- Seventh, we will give high priority to increasing the number of hotel rooms in the city. A new Hilton Hotel is already slated for Capital Center. But we still need hundreds of additional rooms in order to reach the full potential of the Convention

Center. Meanwhile, our new Tourism Council will continue to strengthen tourism in the city, especially in the winter months.

- Eighth, we will completely redesign the circulation system for autos and pedestrians downtown. We will also repair damaged sidewalks, and install new traffic signs.
- Ninth, we will encourage the conversion of Downcity buildings into loft apartments by providing

incentives for retailers to locate on the ground floor of these buildings.

- Tenth, we will prepare India Point Park to receive cruise ships as early as this summer.
- Eleventh, we will encourage the expansion of major commercial uses in the old industrial area across Route 95 from the new mall. The area of Promenade, Kinsley and Valley Streets is one of the three “New Cities.” A 300-unit, luxury apartment building is already in the works.

- Twelfth, we will conduct a mill re-use study to determine which mills should be restored and become part of the new Promenade district.
- Finally, we will begin intensive planning for the redevelopment of the Allens Avenue waterfront, stretching from the power plant to Thurbers Avenue. This New City is called Narragansett Landing. There is great potential for attracting large-scale medical activities to this location, because of the proximity of Rhode

Island Hospital, Women & Infants Hospital, and Brown Medical School. We have begun discussions regarding the development of Narragansett Landing in the best interest of all of these parties.

Before I turn to the neighborhoods, let me make one more point. The New Cities project is vitally important to the future of our city. The dramatic improvements in today's skyline were first conceived by planners more than 20 years ago. In the same way, the planning on New Cities today will continue the Providence Renaissance in

the years to come. Planners estimate that development of the three New Cities could create 30,000 new jobs and more than one hundred million dollars in new taxes. We must give the New Cities the top priority that they deserve.

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The neighborhoods of the city are also participating in the Providence Renaissance. There has been a dramatic turnaround in property values throughout the city. Five years ago, we feared that a revaluation of property would show a billion-dollar loss of

value. Five years later, the revaluation is showing a billion-dollar gain, not a billion-dollar loss.

The resurgence has been particularly strong on the East Side, which has become a premier residential area for professional families in Rhode Island. The average value of single-family homes now exceeds \$300,000 in this neighborhood.

The South Side, including the West End, has also staged a remarkable recovery of value. A decade of municipal investment in schools, housing, streets, parks,

playgrounds, and community centers has certainly paid off. The City Council has been my steadfast partner in the South Side revival. This is an accomplishment in which we can all take pride.

It is important to sustain the momentum of renewal. Therefore, I intend to take the following actions of citywide importance.

- First, I propose that we continue to invest in our housing stock. I am particularly concerned with data that shows more than 25% of our children have elevated lead levels in their

blood. There is ample medical evidence that lead poisoning reduces the ability to learn. We must address this problem. I propose to allocate five million dollars from the bond issue for housing. I have also asked Rhode Island Housing to provide additional funds from its sources for a coordinated campaign against lead.

- Second, I propose that three million dollars from the bond issue be invested in neighborhood shopping areas. One of the greatest assets a neighborhood can have is a vital commercial district.

I propose to select at least five shopping streets in the city for a concentrated effort. Bond funds will be invested to improve the appearance of the street and sidewalks. Loan funds will be offered to businesses. And city officials, working closely with business associations, will improve city services in each area. Several shopping areas are being considered, including Olneyville Square, Plainfield & Pocasset, Downcity, Charles Street, Cranston Street, Thayer Street and Federal Hill.

- Third, I propose that the city contribute a portion of the cost of a new facility at Roger Williams Park, a 15-million-dollar Botanical Center. The highlight of the new center will be a four-story atrium that will be filled with flowering plants all through the year. We project that the Botanical Center will attract 275,000 visitors by its fifth year of operation. The city's share of this major project will be 1.5 million dollars.
- Fourth, we propose to use two million dollars from the bond issue for the

Woonasquatucket Greenway. With this contribution, there will be sufficient funds to construct the Greenway between Olneyville Square and the Johnston town line. The Greenway is vital to the renewal of the old industrial neighborhoods in the Woonasquatucket valley.

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Let me pause a moment to give praise to the man who is most responsible for the Greenway, Fred Lippitt. As chairman of The Providence Plan, Fred has shown a

dogged determination to see this project through. At last, the groundbreaking is within sight. Fred Lippitt is a true gentleman of the city. He has given his time selflessly for the betterment of Providence. Let's show Fred Lippitt our warm appreciation for all he has done.

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- Fifth on our list of neighborhood projects, we are planning to create a military high school as one of the public schools of the city. Schools that integrate military discipline in their

teaching programs have been quite successful in other cities.

- Sixth, we intend to invest \$500,000 towards the cost of a new, permanent home for the Black Repertory Company. This theater company not only is a source of pride for the black community. It also presents the highest achievements of black culture to a wider audience, in Rhode Island and beyond. The Black Repertory Company deserves our financial support.

- Seventh, the YMCA will construct a major new facility to serve the entire community on the South and West Sides. The city will help to make this possible by assisting Traveler's Aid to acquire the current Y property on Broad Street. The new Y will be located at the former Gorham property in the West End.
- Eighth, we propose to clean up, and redevelop the former American Tourister site in the North End. The site is an important gateway to the city,

and has significant potential for new business investment.

- Ninth, the city will launch a major initiative to drastically reduce the rodent population. The most important action will be to provide every household with a large, heavy-duty trash can with its lid permanently attached. Rodents will be unable to reach garbage in a properly sealed can, and their primary source of food will be cut off. Brown University's Environmental Studies Program has

agreed to monitor our efforts, and to measure our degree of success.

- Tenth, all street signs and traffic signs in city neighborhoods will be replaced with new signs that are larger, easier to read, and much harder to steal.
- Eleventh, we propose to invest public funds in the South Providence Business Incubator, which is being developed by the South Providence Development Corporation. A former mill on Gordon Avenue will be completely restored, and will become a

symbol of hope and renewal for the neighborhood. The incubator will offer office space for new businesses that will be located in South Providence and employ neighborhood residents.

In many cases, the downtown and neighborhood projects I have proposed require funding from the new, fifty-million-dollar bond issue. The total amount I am requesting is twenty million dollars. After issuance costs, twenty-five million dollars remains for expenditure to meet local needs.

I believe that this division of the proceeds is in the best interest of the city. No one knows better than individual council members the needs of your individual wards. However, none of the projects I recommend can be funded unless a portion is set aside for projects of citywide importance. This was the policy adopted with the first bond issue. I believe it should be continued with the second bond issue as well.

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The headlines of the past year do not begin to capture the true spirit of the Providence Police Department. In every neighborhood of this city, police officers are hard at work, becoming the friend and advisor of young men and women, building bridges of trust and respect.

Police officers like George Pereira, for example. Pereira is the community police officer for the Mt. Hope neighborhood. He was one of the founders of the Mt. Hope Learning Center, which provides a safe and embracing environment for children after school. On any given day, he might be

conducting cooking classes for children at the Learning Center, reading to the kids, or refereeing basketball games at the Vincent Brown Center.

Guiding young people on a path towards responsible adulthood, instead of a life of crime, is a top priority for the police department's School Squad as well.

The ten-member squad keeps the peace in the city's schools. But the School Squad is successful primarily because police officers reach out and befriend young people at that pivotal time – the time when the

future course of their lives is being set. Police officers become part of the school community, attending Prom nights and graduations. They show thought-provoking videos to teenagers who face tough choices. They even run a summer camp for youngsters who have no other means of escaping the city.

All of these activities put a human face on a police officer's uniform. Lt. Paul Kennedy and Sgt. Tonya King are proud of their School Squad. Squad members include John Carvalho, Maribel Patino, David Edes, Cynthia Rodriguez, Fausto Garcia, Jessie

Ferrell, Nurys Cooley, Scott Sousa, Christopher Rotella and Terrance Green.

In Silver Lake, Patrolman James Bruno works car post 247 from 3 to 11 p.m. Every night, he cruises up and down the streets, again and again, greeting law-abiding friends by name, and carefully scrutinizing the people who raise his suspicions.

In many ways, Officer Bruno is a throwback to the days when officers covered beats on foot. Like the beat officer of old, Bruno knows everyone by name, and he always is on the lookout for things that aren't quite right. Because Officer Bruno

gets results, he has become a trusted, watchful eye in Silver Lake.

I have introduced you to just a few of the men and women who make a difference every day as police officers. Police officers working to make our city safer and our community stronger. Let's show them our appreciation.

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So there you have it: My perspective on the ever-evolving skyline of the city.....the energy and the drumbeat of the city's

neighborhoods.....the hopes and ambitions we all have for the city we love. Providence is my passion and my life's work. I am steadfast....ever determined to make all of our dreams come true. The building of Providence is a thrilling adventure that has only just begun. Let us all work together to make Providence the best city it can possibly be.

Respectfully submitted -

*Viviana Liara /
Mayor*

March 13, 2001

IN CITY COUNCIL
MAR 13 2001

READ
WHEREUPON IT IS ORDERED THAT
THE SAME BE RECEIVED.

Michael R. Corbett CLERK