

CHANGING THE NARRATIVE ABOUT PROVIDENCE

Council President Aponte, Members of the City Council, Members of the General Assembly and fellow residents.

It's been two years since I took office and it's been the privilege of a lifetime to represent the residents of this city as Mayor. I've had a chance to meet with residents from every corner of the city and from every walk of life. I've scheduled community conversations in every neighborhood and coffee hours in every ward. I've visited every school in the city and just about every park, field and court in Providence. I've visited scores of businesses and have attended as many events as can fit on a person's schedule.

At every point, I've tried to interact, listen and learn from our friends and neighbors. And what I've learned throughout the past couple of years is what makes me more optimistic than ever about the potential we have here in Providence. I've learned that our residents' commitment to Providence is second to none. The connection that we have to our individual neighborhoods is unlike anything you'll see throughout the state. The kindness that I've seen towards others, convinces me that you won't find a more compassionate group of residents anywhere else. And, the amazing work that's done in our neighborhoods convinces me that when we're working together, we're capable of accomplishing anything.

Now, we've had challenges in the past and while it is important to understand the root of those challenges, it is far more important to find solutions. After all, we are elected and placed in these positions to move the city forward. Fellow residents, every decision that I have made has been with my eye towards 5 and 10 years into the future and I've focused not only on where we want to be and how to get there, but also on how we're going to sustain it by doing it together.

Providence is a special city with no shortage of strengths that we have to build off of. But it is also fair to say, that we still have not fully unlocked the potential of our people and our institutions. You see, there are four key challenges (each decades in the making) that we must address to create the strong and sustainable future that our city deserves; and it is these four areas (Finances, Infrastructure, Schools, and City Services) that I've been focused on these past 2 years and that I need your continued help to address.

When I took office, we got to work to ensure that the city's finances were healthy. And just as a doctor would treat a patient, we made sure that we stopped the bleeding first. At the end of fiscal year 15, the city faced a \$13M cumulative deficit. Effectively, this is money that we owed on the city's credit card. But with the support of the City Council, and by reforming the way we put the budget together, eliminating almost every one-time, short-term solution, renegotiating contracts, and keeping track of every cent that comes in and out, we ended the following fiscal year with the largest operating surplus in the city's records. And, this means that we'll be paying off the cumulative deficit three years sooner than anyone expected.

Today, we are making our pension payments sooner than we have in decades and saving money in the process. Our cash flow is as strong as it has been in years and by the end of fiscal year 17, in 5 short months, I can confidently state that Providence will for the first time since 2011, once again have a Rainy Day Fund. We've done this by being forward thinking, by being responsible and we've done it while providing relief to our residents by lowering the dreaded car tax.

And, people are taking notice. This year, Fitch Ratings Agency cited our surplus and the structural changes to our budget as it chose to upgrade our credit rating by two grades from a BBB- to an A-.

While we have stabilized our cash flow and near-term finances, there are still significant long-term challenges to address. Over a year ago, I engaged a broad cohort of residents and professionals to review our long-term prospects and to make recommendations that will get us on track. We will need the entire community's support going forward as we bring all stakeholders together seeking a grand bargain to once-and-for-all address our long-term structural challenges. It won't be easy and it won't happen overnight. But the work is ongoing and with the continued support of the City Council and our state house delegation, I am confident that we will find a long-term, sustainable solution to our fiscal challenges so that we can focus on building off of all of our city's great strengths.

Since I took office, I have been focused on the long-term. And there is perhaps no more important long-term commitment that we can make than investing in our infrastructure. Nothing that we care about can be accomplished without repairing the roads, bridges, sewers and buildings that we use each day.

For too long, we have failed to plan and we've been locked in a constant process of waiting until things break before we fix them. Well, we've changed our approach and that's why I recently submitted a 5-year Capital Improvement Plan to the City Plan Commission. For the first time in anyone's memory, Providence will have a predictable and reliable schedule for investments in our infrastructure. I know that no city has ever cut its way to greatness and that is why I propose investing \$120M over the next 5 years to rebuild our city. Coupled with our commitment to long-term budgeting, we know we not only can indeed afford these investments, but more importantly, we know we can't afford not to make them.

You, our residents, understand this and you've made your voice heard at the ballot box by overwhelmingly approving a ballot measure to begin this work. Over the coming months, I will be working with the City Council to make sure that we fulfill that mandate and pass an infrastructure bond so we can literally build the foundation to keep our city strong.

I want to be sure that Providence is built to last. This means investing not only on bricks and mortar but investing in our most precious asset: our kids. And that's why the third major area that we must improve are the structures and supports that surround our schools. I've heard from too many families who have told me that they love living in our city but they're worried about sending their kids to the public schools. They feel as though their children will miss out on something and not be able to reach their potential. That is why I have made it my personal mission, and I've committed to being as present and involved as possible, to reform education in our city.

In one of my first acts as Mayor two years ago, I began the transformation of the school department central office. We have a new Superintendent who made a personal, long-term commitment to the school department, and as a show of that commitment, he is the first Superintendent in decades to send his kids to our public schools. Thank you, Superintendent Maher for your commitment. Under his leadership, we have restructured our central office and shifted resources by moving 36 people who now spend all or most of their time inside the schools where they're most needed, providing support to kids and teachers.

We believe in giving schools autonomy and in empowering them to succeed. In Providence, we have some of the most inspiring people who have dedicated their lives to teaching our kids. A perfect example is Javier Montanez. Growing up in Providence, Javier was homeless over three years before dropping out of Hope High School. But showing that Providence grit and perseverance, he eventually earned his GED, graduated from college, earned a Master's degree, and then a Doctorate degree. Mr. Montanez is actually Dr. Montanez and he is now the principal at Leviton Elementary School. He is a principal that leads by example and with his heart; and he's been able to bring the community into his school to create an environment that feels like a family.

I want to recognize Dr. Montanez and his student who are here with us tonight, a tremendous example of what Providence has to offer. I know Principal Montanez is a great leader because every time we heap praise on him, the first thing he does is say, "it's not me; it's my teachers and my staff." Thank you, Principal Montanez, you are an inspiration for all of us.

With leaders like him and committed PPSD teachers there each step of the way, we are seeing results and progress. Last year, we saw increases in English proficiency in 21 out of 22 elementary schools and we saw increases in math proficiency, in every single one of our 22 elementary schools. That is great but we have to do more.

We believe that our kids should have the tools that they need to be prepared for the world that awaits them. That is why last year, we invested over \$2M to purchase over 8,000 new laptops for our students; getting us closer to the magic 1:1 ratio of technology to students. And with our new partnership with Sprint, more of our students now have access to high-speed internet in their homes. Access to technology is no longer a luxury and when our kids have the same tools to succeed as anyone else, I am confident they will outcompete and outperform anyone else.

Every dollar invested in kids is a dollar well spent. And that's why I recently announced, that for the first time in 6 years, we will be increasing the city's contribution to the schools and sending a message that we believe in our kids and we'll make sure they have the resources to achieve their dreams.

We'll also be spending \$10M this year alone in making significant repairs to many of our school buildings; and this is in addition to \$13M spent in previous years. I know that we have a lot more to do to get our schools up to the standard our kids deserve. I look forward to working with the Council and planning our capital expenditures so that we construct the kinds of classrooms that inspire our kids to learn.

Even with all of this, there is only so much that the city can do alone. To reach our ambitious goals for our kids, we need your help. People frequently ask me about how they can get involved. They want to volunteer as a tutor or a mentor, or they want to help paint a classroom. Well, that is why I announced the "All In" education initiative. I invite the entire city to join us on Saturday, April 8 and make a statement that you are "All In" for education as well. Partnering with the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University and the Nellie Mae Foundation, we're going to make a statement that Providence is "All In" on education and we will stop at nothing short of creating the best urban education district in the entire country! Providence, we can do it! But we need you to join us!

We want to hear from every parent, every teacher, every educator, student, and stakeholder; please join us, tomorrow, February 2, and help us shape the agenda for the "All In" education summit. We'll be meeting at 5:30pm at 444 Westminster Street. I'll see you then!

And the fourth major issue that our city has faced is City Services. When I took office, there was a pervasive sense that in order to get something done, you had to know a guy in City Hall. My administration has led with Ethics and Transparency and has made sure that our departments work for you regardless of who you are or who you know.

We developed the PVD311 system that makes it easier than ever to get in touch with us and our residents have stepped up to help. The new PVD 311 app has been downloaded over 1800 times in the first year, compared to about 450 downloads in the previous app's entire history. Through new training, new technology, new equipment, and new leadership, we've established a new culture in City Hall. I can assure you that when you call my Center for City Services, our folks are courteous, they're responsive, and they will get to work for you right away.

Because of the systems changes we have made, the results are being seen. Several weeks ago, the city was hit with about 10" of snow. And by the time folks woke up the next morning, the streets were plowed curb-to-curb. This is not a one-off; in fact, we had 5 significant storms last year, and the same was true each time: curb-to-curb. This is the new normal and the standard that I want everyone to expect going forward.

Now, our folks in the Parks Department and in DPW, they do an incredible job year-round. And I want to highlight the phenomenal work they've done on the other major pain-point from previous years: and that's potholes. If you think back to just three years ago, as you drove around the city, you'd find massive craters throughout our streets. But you don't see them anymore. By separate measures, we've reduced potholes throughout the city by 80-85%, almost eliminating them. And when they do appear, we address it right away and with a patch that actually sticks.

Colonel Michael Borg and Wendy Nilsson, I'd like for you to stand and receive this recognition on behalf of all the good men and women from DPW and Parks that are providing the best city services of any city in this state.

We are changing the narrative about Providence and we've done it together. Today, city hall buzzing with activity as each department is pushing harder, faster, farther.

Our Department of Recreation has created 58 new recreation programs in just the past 2 years and is now serving a larger number of kids than we have in recent memory, and perhaps in our history. We have invested in our swimming programs, we opened a new rec center, and if you're a working parent and you're struggling to pay the bills, I'm proud to share with you that we have a program that will instantly keep more dollars in your pocket. For the cost of only \$5/week per child, the city now provides high-quality programming and full-day child care for our kids throughout the summer. Your kids will be fed, they will be safe, they will be learning, and you get to save your hard-earned cash.

We know that hunger is a critical issue that too many of our kids face and we noticed that many of our kids in the Rec Centers were often going without dinner. As a result, the city increased the number of dinners served from 3,000 in 2015 to a full 100,000 in 2016. That's 100,000 times that kids went to bed with their bellies full because in this land of so much wealth, no child should ever experience hunger and no family should ever be short on food! Please join me in congratulating the entire team from the Healthy Communities Office and the Rec Department for this tremendous accomplishment!

And through improved employee training, our Parks Department is investing in our public spaces at a seemingly record pace. Over the past 18 months, they've made 22 major renovations to go along with 24 significant rehabs to neighborhood parks. By doing the work in-house, they are stretching every dollar as much as 40% farther. And along with the Rhode Island Foundation, we have repaved the roads at Roger Williams Park and this spring, we will be unveiling the new striping that will solidify its place as the crown jewel of the emerald necklace surrounding the city. We wouldn't be able to do this work without the extraordinary people who work with the Parks Department and volunteer in a "Friends of" groups. We need more help, so please join us and adopt a park.

And as we think holistically about the city, I am proud that under the leadership of Bonnie Nickerson, the City of Providence has the best Planning Department in all of New England. Hands down! Bonnie and her team led a process that began with the state's suggestion of rebuilding the 6/10 connector highway in place. Through community engagement, we ended up with a plan that will not only be one of the largest public works investment in our neighborhoods in decades, but accomplishes our goal of reconnecting neighborhoods, opening new land for development, and creating roughly 1.5 miles of protected bike lanes to encourage people to get on their bikes and stay fit.

Just as that is a transformative project, we invite you to be part of another one that we are undertaking in the coming months. This one involves Kennedy Plaza in the heart of our downtown. Kennedy Plaza has the potential to be Providence's Central Park and our Planning Department will again be leading a process so that you can help us shape the future of the park. Please join us two weeks from now on February 16 at 5pm at 444 Westminster Street and lend your voice.

The center of our city has been host to some spectacular events over the past couple of years, but the one that takes the cake has been the award-winning PVD Fest. We've attracted roughly 150,000 people to downtown these past two years in an event that spotlights our arts community and turns all of downtown into a stage. I'm happy to say that PVD Fest will be returning for year 3 in June as the arts community will once again take over downtown and turn it into an exciting spectacle. We need your help, so once again I say, Join Us!

Our arts community extends far beyond this one event. During the spring, summer and fall, there have been major outdoor events virtually every single weekend in the city. From food and neighborhood music festivals, to major sporting events and conventions, there is always something happening in our city. Combined with the nationally-recognized Waterfire, Providence continues to show that we are the Creative Capital of the United States of America!

And I'm so happy to report that during these large outdoor festivals, we've had virtually no public safety incidents. Even while we piloted open-container policies, our residents have made us proud as we've come together as a community. And that is the driving philosophy in our approach to public safety. By building meaningful relationships with the community, our police department is transforming what it means to be a police officer. Because of the entire community's proactive outreach, 2016 was tied for having the lowest number of homicides in 30 years in the city of Providence; combined with a 37% decline in the number of shootings! Thank you to the police department, our community partners, and all of the people who have worked hard, over many years, to make our streets safer! But we need your help, over the past 2 years we've more than doubled our Neighborhood Crime Watch groups and we're eager to establish more. We ask you to be part of the solution; once again, Join Us!

I want to pause here to recognize the incredible work of our first responders in public safety. Whether it is recovering an illegal weapon or running into a burning building, the men and women of our police and fire departments make us proud of the heroics they display each day. Please join me recognizing the brave men and women who keep us safe every day. And I appreciate the work that you do to raise money for our Rec Centers and being coaches for our middle schools students.

I said that I wanted Providence to be the City that works. Two years in, I feel confident in saying that City Hall is buzzing and as busy as it's ever been. We are delivering on our promise to provide you, our residents, with a City Hall that is streamlining, innovating, delivering, and pushing forward every single day. Public service is in our blood and we will not stop until we have the most efficient, responsive, and cutting-edge City Hall in the entire United States. We can do it!

So I stand before you today, 2 years in, with the message that we are building for the long term, we are changing the narrative, and re-writing that new script together. We are tackling the big challenges head on. We're getting our finances on track and investing for the long-term once again. We are daring and being bold on public education and we've changed the culture at city hall so that folks are looking at us for best practices.

That's more than we've seen in a very long time and you can expect to see cranes in the sky this spring. This is creating quality jobs, new businesses and new opportunities throughout our city.

But it's not just businesses; home sales are heating up as well because people want to live in our city! Sales of homes in Providence are up across the board with single-family home sales increasing by 24%.

And, in the past two years, our hotels have reported that revenues are up as people come to visit and experience our the Creative Capital.

People love our city; they are investing here, moving here, and visiting here.

The project of city-building is always a work-in-progress. But I am up for the challenge of unlocking this city's full potential because I know our residents are as well. And I know that our folks are looking for real, sustainable solutions. That's why we've been so focused on the long-term, building a solid foundation, and engaging the public along the way.

And while we are here, it's important to address the changed landscape in which we now find ourselves. It's been two weeks since our new president was inaugurated and already we've seen attacks on the principles we hold most dear. While I am deeply concerned about the new administration, I have become newly inspired by our people here in Providence. We've rallied together and we've shown support for women, for immigrants, for refugees, and we'll continue to do so for anyone who is targeted or threatened. As the son of immigrants myself, I am deeply proud and personally thankful of how inclusive, welcoming and kind-hearted our residents have been.

In our system of government, ultimate power will always lie in "we the people." And your local government needs you now more than ever. To my fellow residents, if you are concerned that our city is not living up to its full potential, I invite you to be part of the solution. Let's focus our energy on building something together that is amazing! Whether it is serving on a board or commission, attending our All In education summit, adopting a public park, helping to shape the vision for Kennedy Plaza, performing at PVD Fest, starting a Neighborhood Crime Watch group, or volunteering your time to paint a school classroom. There are so many ways to help.

As President Obama said, "we are the change we seek." Let's channel our energies to build something exciting and let's do it together. Join us, and let's build the One Providence that we know we have the potential to be. Thank you!