

Inaugural Address
Mayor Vincent A. Cianci, Jr.
January 4, 1999

My Fellow Citizens:

On this very spot, almost a quarter-century ago, I delivered my first Inaugural Address to the people of Providence.

I surveyed the city before me in 1975, and saw a downtown in economic distress, neighborhoods in desperate need of new investment, and a waterfront that contributed almost nothing to the wellbeing of our people.

I argued that Providence had many assets upon which to rebuild: strong neighborhoods, great colleges and hospitals, beautiful buildings, an impressive setting at the head of Narragansett Bay. I called for a “new beginning,” a new “spirit of adventure and excitement” – a new commitment to progress in the center city, the neighborhoods and the waterfront.

How far we have come in the 24 years since that day. At the dawn of a new century and a new era, Providence is in the forefront of American cities – a shining

example of a city reborn. Everywhere there is evidence of urban energy and vitality.

To my left, a magnificent new shopping mall rises majestically in Capital Center – once the site of bleak railroad yards and ugly buildings. Now sleek new hotels sprout up around the Rhode Island Convention Center. During the Christmas season, Providence College hosted Notre Dame at the Civic Center, *Showboat* played to a full house at the grandly restored Providence Performing Arts Center, and *A Christmas Carol* held the stage at the Tony Award-winning Trinity Repertory Company. On gentle summer

evenings, thousands assembled along our riverwalks as *Waterfire* weaved its mystical spell. Waterplace Park is a magical transformation of old industrial rivers into a grand focal point of urban inspiration. And the new Fleet Skating Center captivates young and old alike on crisp winter evenings.

There is a new spirit of hope and confidence in the neighborhoods as well. Here are some reasons why:

- Since 1990, we have invested more than 300 million dollars of public money in the neighborhoods of the

city – far more than we have invested in the downtown.

- In this time, 73 miles of city streets have been resurfaced.
- 42 parks and playgrounds have been refurbished.
- 1,700 houses have been painted or refurbished.
- Thousands of sidewalks have been resurfaced.
- 225 new classrooms have been built.
- Some of the newest and best equipped public schools in Rhode Island have been built on the South and West sides of the city.

- Property values are rising in most parts of the city.
- New, much-brighter streetlights have been installed in 80 percent of the city.
- The police department has new cruisers, new technology, and a state-of-the-art fingerprint identification system.
- The police department has more officers in uniform than in any other time in the last 20 years.
- The Gun Court that we created has put more than 350 gun criminals in prison.

- The crime rate in the city has fallen by more than 40 percent since 1990. In fact, crime in 1998 was at its lowest level since the 1960s.
- And our arguments on behalf of property tax relief have been heard in the State House. Starting this July, we will finally begin to phase out the automobile tax and the inventory tax.

Repaved streets, refurbished playgrounds, restored housing, rising property values, computer-centered classrooms, first-rate equipment for the public safety forces, brighter and safer

streets, repealed taxes on automobiles and inventory: These are the dreams of 1975 that become the reality of 1999!

In that first election, in 1974, I was elected by the slimmest of margins – only 709 votes. Five elections later, in November of 1998, I received 97% of the vote – and I will be forever grateful. The meaning of the November election is clear: There is almost universal support for the progress we have made in the center city and the neighborhoods. I interpret the election as a mandate – a mandate to press on with even greater determination in the renewal

enterprise – always reaching for that lofty standard that makes a city great in the eyes of its people, and in the pages of history.

In the next four years, these will be my priorities, and not in any particular order: One, accelerate the pace of redevelopment and economic renewal in our DOWNCITY and our neighborhoods; two, bring about reductions in the tax burden on business; three, accelerate school reform, so that the public schools become an important reason why people choose to live in this city; four, implement a tax revaluation that strengthens our neighborhoods; and, five, build a new

public safety headquarters that fully meets the needs of the city well into the 21st century.

I believe we can build on our successes to date and really achieve something extraordinary in this city. Our reputation has never been higher; the Providence Renaissance is a model for other American cities; now is the time to attract quality employers and talented individuals to our city.

In order to realize our full potential, our property taxes and our public schools must

be strong selling points for the city – reasons why employers and homeowners alike want to come to our city and remain in our city.

We cannot accomplish these goals without unity. The interests of Providence and Rhode Island are inextricably linked. I call on the Governor, the General Assembly, the Providence City Council, the School Board, teachers and parents to join me in this quest for excellence. Working together, we can accomplish this – and more.

During the last eight years, education has been one of our top priorities because of

the tremendous growth and demographic change that have taken place. We have added almost 7,000 students to enrollment, hired a thousand additional teachers and other employees, built 225 new classrooms, opened nine new schools, and increased the annual school budget by a hundred million dollars. The new schools we have built, particularly those on the south and west sides of the city, utilize the best computer technology, and are among the best equipped in America. We can claim success in the field of education. But we can do more.

Now, with enrollment growth beginning to slow down, we will put tremendous emphasis on improving the quality of the Providence public schools. We will recruit a new superintendent of national stature. We will negotiate a progressive and reform-minded teacher's contract. And we will create exciting new schools that can successfully compete with the best suburban and private schools in America.

Can this be done? Are we reaching too far? These are the anxieties that we must learn to overcome. If we Rhode Islanders have a failing, it is a lack of self-esteem —

the collective feeling that “It can’t happen here.”

It can happen here. And it is happening here. We all know that.

A generation ago, Providence was a town of crumbling mills and empty storefronts. Today we are a great city, celebrated for our theater, our restaurants, the preservation of our historic architecture, our institutions of higher learning, and the grand reconstruction of our public spaces. In a burst of creativity, we have produced Waterplace, *Waterfire*, and the Fleet Skating

Center in rapid succession. On Friday, a new TV series set in the City of Providence will have its national premiere. And the new association with our Partnership City of Florence will bring paintings and art works, along with visiting artisans, craftsmen, and gourmet chefs from Florence to our city.

We cannot rest on our laurels. The time has come to set our sights even higher. With the foundation that we have laid in the last 25 years, Providence is ready to take another great leap forward. In a few weeks, I will announce plans to redevelop the city on a scale never attempted before.

I will propose that the city acquire hundreds of acres of industrial property, at three separate locations not far from this spot. I will propose to completely redevelop this acreage for the highest quality commercial, institutional and residential uses. I believe that these three sites, once redeveloped, will rank among the most desirable locations in America for prime development. There is enough land at these locations to double the total amount of building space devoted to prime downtown uses in our city at this time. These projects

will be the largest public commitment in the history of our city.

The development we have in mind is on such a scale that we call each of the development areas a “New City.” Making the New Cities a reality will be important work for the next four years – important work for governmental, business, institutional and civic leaders of our state.

Where are these New Cities located? One is the old industrial waterfront – a sea of petroleum tanks, asphalt plants and other unsightly uses, stretching more than a mile

along Allens Avenue. The industrial waterfront today contributes very little tax benefit to the city, and very little employment opportunity as well. In fact, the waterfront contributes only about \$2 million in property taxes, or 1% of our total levy, and the petroleum industry employs fewer than 100 people.

We cannot, and will not, allow this situation to continue. The waterfront is the most important asset that the New Providence has. Now is the time to put that asset to work, for the good of our city and our state. We can bring about billions in

new investment, create tens of thousands of new jobs, and generate tens of millions in new tax revenue for the city.

The second New City begins on the other side of the highway from where Providence Place is under construction. It flows along the banks of the Woonasquatucket River to the edge of Olneyville Square. The Woonasquatucket River Valley – once the center of our city's manufacturing might – is today an industrial cemetery, packed with block after block of deteriorated mills. With Providence Place rising in the distance, the time has come for

sweeping change. The adjacent neighborhoods of Olneyville, Valley and Smith Hill will be major beneficiaries. I foresee bike paths, the reclamation of green space, and the creation of jobs and opportunity that will raise living standards in these neighborhoods.

The third New City is not land at all; it is the “air rights” on top of Route 95, extending from the Atwells Avenue bridge to the Broad Street bridge over the highway. The air rights would be completely decked over — just as the Mass. Pike is decked over to provide space for Copley Place in Boston.

In Providence, we could obtain 12 acres of new development space, right in the center of the city. We would also block off the traffic noise and the polluting fumes created by 250,000 cars a day flowing through the city.

We envision that the dramatic development of the Route 95 air rights will speed the renewal of Atwells Avenue, the Armory District and Elmwood. It will reconnect these neighborhoods to Downcity, link East Side to West Side, and create a unified and vigorous city once again.

Just as the railroad tracks and the Chinese Wall divided our city, so Route 95 has divided the city and contributed to the deterioration of neighborhoods, even though it is a vital link to the world of commerce beyond. What has happened? The railroad came down, the Chinese Wall came down, and now we have billions of new investment in the heart of our city. Now we must turn our attention to the highways: We must bridge the divide between east and west in our city; we must bring new hope and new opportunity to the people of Federal Hill, Elmwood and the West End; we must all be united once again.

In order to carry out these ambitious plans, we will have to raise hundreds of millions of dollars. We will have to sweep away the old, and create dramatic new settings for new construction. We will have to address the needs of employers for skilled labor. And we will have to ensure that the business taxes we charge are among the most highly competitive in America.

All of these things can be done. They can't happen in one year, or two or three; but we can begin today the great work of transforming our city. Remember that

Capital Center was once a sprawling freight yard, a dying use in a dying city. We have so utterly transformed that deserted and disregarded real estate that the most prestigious department stores in America are making their way to our city. We are reclaiming our retail prominence when it was thought to be lost forever. We are succeeding where other cities have failed, because we had the will and the resources to totally change the city center.

Now it is our destiny to totally transform the riverfront of our city. In the 19th century, the rivers of Providence were

used as a sewer. In the 20th century, the rivers were channeled, covered up and forgotten. In the 21st century, the rivers of Providence will be the centerpiece of a revitalized and vigorous city. We will build a great city on the hills and the plains overlooking the rivers and the bay. We will reconnect our city, from east to west.

More than 350 years ago, Roger Williams rounded the bend at Fox Point in an Indian canoe, and saw before him the site of a new city, a new city he called Providence. What hopes and dreams he must have had, for the city he would create

out of a wilderness! Today we must share those same dreams, we must see the new city on the horizon, and we must never rest 'til the New Providence is ours!

Pincho Lanza
Mayor

Jan 4, 1999
