



October 2, 2016

Dear Fellow East Siders:

As the Presidential campaign continues to veer off course, this week's letter discusses open government, civil rights and the Fire Department budget.

Last Monday evening, I presented to the Ordinance Committee a set of proposed reforms to the lobbyist registration ordinance. As discussed in [last week's letter](#), the reforms would close a loophole that exempts the City's most powerful lobbying organization. To my surprise and disappointment, the committee members denied the extent of the Providence Apartment Association's influence, maintaining that its exemption from registration as a lobbyist promotes "democracy." They also rejected the argument that City Council members could personally gain from transparency, as it could help them know when to recuse and thus avoid ethics complaints such as the one currently pending against the City Council President. Two days later, the Board of Elections referred a complaint against the City Council President on issues of possible personal use of campaign funds. As the Board's accompanying [Report](#) makes clear, the discrepancies were found after several years of unfiled reports (which resulted in tens of thousands of dollars of unpaid fines) were finally submitted. The same was true in the case of Councilman Jackson's arrest and indictment, in which reports were not filed for years, and the gap in transparency postponed the discovery of possible illegal conduct. For that reason, I will continue to press the issue of transparency with my colleagues, as the lack thereof has created a cloud over the City Council and its leadership. I wish to thank all of you who have stepped forward to sign petitions that will require the City Council leadership to hold public hearings on legislation I have introduced or co-sponsored to promote transparency (and other goals) that to date has been ignored. As those petitions are filed and hearings are scheduled, I will ask your help in attending the hearings and telling my colleagues about the importance of open and transparent government.

Next Thursday, the City Council will receive the [Final Report](#) of the Commission to Study Equity and Diversity in City Government. The Report notes the urgent need to recruit City employees in all departments who resemble more closely the communities they serve. In response to statewide questions about possible racial profiling by local police departments, the General Assembly enacted the Community Police Relations Act of 2015, which mandates the collection of police stop data and the regulation of certain police practices that have adversely affected the minority community. A coalition of Providence groups wishes to address these issues further with a proposed ordinance called the [Community Safety Act](#). While I support the groups' goal of better police-community relations, the Police Department has expressed concerns about particular language in the proposal which would eliminate critical law enforcement tools, rather than find ways ensure the fair use of those tools. With that in mind, I have proposed an [alternative ordinance](#) and [companion resolution](#) that would codify and build upon the key measures of the 2015 state law, while requesting that the Police Department develop and review policies in critical areas (such as "gang lists") that contain best practices nationally. At a community meeting Wednesday night, the Mayor stated he is working with the Police Department and community groups to prepare a comprehensive program to address these issues.

The City Council is preparing to review the tentative agreement between the administration and the fire fighters' union to resolve pending lawsuits and grievances the Union filed in response to the administration's implementation of a shift change last August. The tentative agreement incorporates a 5-year contract, which is longer than State law maximum of 3 years. In a [Letter](#) to the administration, the Finance Committee Chair noted that State law permits 5-year contracts only for communities in receivership or with a pension plan in "critical status." While Providence's plan meets this standard, the proposed tentative agreement (at least as we know it today) does not address the pension issue in an urgent manner. The tentative agreement, by its nature, will achieve the important goal of labor peace, but the administration must demonstrate that its terms will serve the City's long term interests. If not, there may be alternative ways to restore labor peace without a 5-year commitment. For example, the tentative agreement calls for the City to restore four platoons at the old pay scale by November 1, and to mediate or arbitrate the "back pay" issue resulting from shift change. If the City undertook these two measures unilaterally, it could restore labor peace while creating space to negotiate the best possible 3-year contract when the current one expires next June 30. While this would defer anticipated savings from the tentative agreement for eight months, it would avoid the risks to the City of a 5-year contract. I am not ready to propose this alternative, but I want to make sure this tentative agreement is the best possible deal for the City before making the 5-year commitment it entails.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Sam Zurier'.