



January 15, 2017

Dear Fellow East Siders:

When the new administration and City Council took office in 2015, we did not face a “Category 5 fiscal hurricane.” Instead, the Mayor’s inaugural address, budget address and State of the City address identified goals of solving the City’s structural financial issues (to avoid “kicking the can down the road”) improving city services (to create a “city that works”) and supporting education (developing “a culture of excellence at every school.” As we begin the second half of this government’s term in office, we consider each in turn.

Last Spring, the administration released the NRN consultant’s report to support a 10-year plan to address the City’s weak tax base, deferred maintenance and severely underfunded retiree pension and benefit programs. So far, the administration has achieved savings in some areas (such as LED street lights) and slight savings or cost neutrality in others (union contracts), increasing the modest budgetary surpluses from the Taveras administration to support a “rainy day fund” in a few years. While these steps point in the right direction, there is no plan to address the more difficult issues over time. The Mayor announced the formation of working groups to address four areas: revenue enhancement, retiree benefits, contributions from tax-exempt institutions and capital budgeting. I was pleased to attend some meetings of the capital budgeting working group, and I believe we can “catch up” on our infrastructure over a 10-12 year period if we act prudently, but none of these groups have provided interim reports or plans. To solve these issues, I believe this administration should follow Mayor Taveras’s strategy of developing a master checklist of tasks for each stakeholder (unions, tax-exempts, taxpayers, etc.) to identify their role and to demonstrate how it represents a fair share of a sustainable solution. I am concerned that this project is not proceeding with the urgency or commitment it needs. In November, 86% of the voters approve a bond to support \$40 million in infrastructure repairs; however, the City Council’s “leadership” blocked it by insisting upon individual discretionary accounts. I would like to see the Mayor takes this issue directly to the voters to overcome the shenanigans of the City Council “leadership.”

In the area of City services, the administration has introduced the PVD 311 App, which I hear is increasing resident access to services and the level at which services have been provided. In the area of public safety 2015 saw some increases in crime, but 2016 saw reductions that brought the level below the City’s five-year average. Also, Police Chief Clements gained State accreditation the Department, and has worked closely with the community to face the national issues arising from such places as Ferguson and Chicago. With that said, the Police Department remains understaffed, and we missed an opportunity to increase capacity when the recent Fire Department collective bargaining agreement failed to achieve the savings in staffing identified by a consultant. Unfortunately, too many potential savings were “left on the table” in the framework of a five-year contract. Also, while the State enacted legislation to increase police accountability, there is an opportunity to enact further reforms at the local level that do not compromise legitimate law enforcement tools.

The Providence Public Schools have made steady if slow progress, with a thankfully smooth transition when Superintendent Chris Maher succeeded the highly regarded Susan Lusi. The School Board is advancing school-based autonomy, and the administration has continued the Providence Reads program and begun a new summer learning program. With that said, funding remains a serious issue. Over the past two years, increases in State aid have masked flat municipal funding and reductions in federal aid. Last week, the administration released a five-year budget that projected annual funding gaps in the tens of millions of dollars, following December’s decision by the Council on Elementary and Secondary Education to approve the expansion of the Achievement First mayoral academy, which is projected to have a negative financial impact of almost \$100 million over the next ten years. In this way, the Mayor’s decision as a member of the Achievement First Board to approve the expansion to benefit 1,000 or 2,000 Providence children will harm the 20,000 Providence children who do not attend the school. The City Council’s Education Committee has invited the School Department (whom the Mayor did not consult before approving the Achievement First expansion) to review the potentially catastrophic consequences of the Achievement First expansion and propose solutions. I look forward to the opportunity to advocate for our children in that setting.

To conclude, the past two years have brought some progress and some setbacks in budgeting, City services and education. The City’s government is now “on the clock” to address these issues with greater urgency and commitment over the next two years.

Sincerely,

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