



November 3, 2013

Dear Fellow East Siders:

This week's Ward Letter discusses the "welcome to Providence" tax penalty, pilot schools and the proposal to close convert Alvarez High School to a middle school.

Last Monday (October 28), the Ways and Means Committee approved an ordinance I co-sponsored with Councilwoman Matos to end the "welcome to Providence" tax penalty. The Providence property tax has a lower rate for owner-occupants, and there currently is a lag when an owner-occupant purchases a house subject currently taxed at the higher rate. Under the current system, a homeowner may pay the higher rate (a 65% increase) for more than a year. This is not only unfair, but also can affect purchasing decisions and mortgage financing opportunities. If the City Council passes the ordinance, then beginning on July 1, 2014, the new tax rate will take effect upon the submission of proper documentation, which can take place at the closing. The Ways and Means Committee considered making the measure effective immediately, and also to grant retroactive relief to taxpayers who have become subject to the tax penalty in recent months. The Committee ultimately decided not to take these measures because there was a risk of a negative impact on the current year's budget, which is very tight at this time.

Last Wednesday (October 30), the Education Committee heard a presentation from Larry Myatt, the Director of the Education Resources Consortium in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Over the past two decades, Mr. Myatt has been at forefront of the development of "Pilot Schools" in Boston. These are public schools with additional autonomy in the areas of curriculum, staffing, budget and governance. In Boston, Los Angeles and other cities, these schools allow school districts to support innovation, diversity and growth without the negative financial impact caused by charter schools. In Boston, the teachers' union supported changes in the contract to permit Pilot Schools, and those schools currently rank among the most accomplished and popular within the Boston Public School system. The Providence Teachers Union contract is set to expire next August, and the Education Committee will consider last week's presentation as part of a report with recommendations for negotiating goals for the next contract.

At last Monday's School Board meeting, the School Department reported on the current mismatch between anticipated enrollments and available facilities. In preparing registrations for the current year, the School Department discovered a shortage of middle school seats, which led to overcrowding at some middle schools, including Nathan Bishop. (In that school's case, I worked with the School Department to remind them of the limits set by the State's construction grant, and the enrollment fell below that limit within two weeks.) Based on this year's 4th and 5th grade enrollments, the School Department projects a substantial shortage of middle school seats in the coming two years. There also is a surplus of high school seats. On this basis, the School Department proposed converting the Alvarez High School to a middle school. This alternative would create displacements, and may trigger the School Board's school closure policy, which requires extensive public input prior to taking action. For these reasons, I introduced a resolution the City Council will debate this coming Thursday night (Nov. 7) urging the School Department and School Board to consider carefully the needs of all stakeholders in addressing facilities issues.

Sincerely,

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