

March 18, 2018

Dear Fellow East Siders:

As we brace this week for a possible fourth winter storm this month (anticipated to coincide with the start of Spring), this week's letter will discuss the reusable bag ordinance, speed cameras and the future of the Providence Public Schools.

At this past Thursday's meeting, the City Council gave final passage to an ordinance to reduce the distribution of single-use bags in Providence stores. Once signed by the Mayor, the ordinance will begin a 1-year transition period of education, during which merchants can exhaust their inventory of existing bags. At the end of that transition, merchants will be required to charge \$.10 per single-use bag (with the merchant retaining the proceeds). Some environmental justice groups criticized the ordinance on both procedural and substantive grounds. Their substantive issue is the impact of the ordinance on low-income families for whom the fee will impose a significant hardship. I supported the ordinance based on the goals of the transition period to educate consumers and to distribute a large number of free, reusable bags, similar to successful programs in Cambridge and Boston, among other places. The opponents' procedural issue is the lack of legislative deliberation, as the ordinance went through with lightning speed. The legislative hearing took place the week after the ordinance was introduced, and initial passage the week after that. In this case, community groups will have an opportunity over the 12-month transition period to discuss the ordinance and propose any necessary amendments. With that said, I believe their general point about the legislative process has merit. The City Council's committees could benefit from more organization – while some bills languish for years without a hearing, others with major impacts zoom through without sufficient public engagement. In all committees I have chaired, I have provided a prompt hearing with adequate notice to every piece of legislation introduced, but most committee chairs retain the discretion to “kill” legislation by making a unilateral decision to prevent the rest of the committee (not to mention the City Council) from considering bills the Chair does not like. I do not have the support of my colleagues yet, but I will continue to press for an orderly legislative process in which committees do their job to review legislation thoroughly on a timely basis.

Also at last Thursday's meeting, the City Council resolved to review the speeding camera program, beginning with a hearing in the Finance Committee this Tuesday, March 20 at 5:00 p.m. While the General Assembly (which has authority over the amount of the fines) is considering amendments to mitigate those impacts, the City Council will review such issues as the hours of operation of the cameras, which currently extend past school hours. On a related note, many of us only learned recently that the school zones have a 20 miles per hour speed limit (per state law), rather than the City-wide 25 miles per hour, thanks to new signs installed near the specific schools with speed cameras. In my opinion, students and drivers would benefit from a reminder that the lower speed limit applies even where cameras are not installed, so I plan to introduce a resolution at the next City Council meeting requesting the installation of 20 miles per hour school zone speed limit signs in all school zones, regardless of whether a camera is installed there.

Also on Tuesday night, March 20, at 5:30 p.m., the School Department Oversight Committee will hold a hearing on the 5-year plan for the Providence Public Schools, both from a programmatic and a financial standpoint. Beginning with the passage of the No Child Left Behind law in 2001, school districts have measured success in terms of the percentage of students achieving a standard of proficiency on tests of language and mathematics skills. The data have revealed an “achievement gap” that is largely defined along demographic and economic lines. In response, the School Department has devoted greater resources to students from disadvantaged populations to help bring more across the proficiency line. When a student is struggling with issues of a home where English is not spoken, housing instability and other stresses, our schools must invest greater resources to fill these gaps. The State has provided additional resources through a revised funding formula since 2010, but those increases are coming to an end, and flaws in the funding formula still leave gaps that the City cannot afford to fill. At Tuesday's hearing, the School Department will describe its strategic plan to address those gaps over the next five years, and how its budgetary outlook will affect its programmatic goals. Coincidentally, Bryant University is holding a forum this Friday on educational equity which I plan to attend, as I believe that while the Providence Public Schools will and must improve based on internal reforms, many of its challenges are the result of State-wide inequities that are best viewed in a national context.

Sincerely,

*Samuel D. Zurier*

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