



March 24, 2013

Dear Fellow East Siders:

Two years ago, the Mayor announced that a “Category 5 fiscal hurricane” threatened the City. This week reflected the progress we made since then, but also the clouds that remain on the horizon.

On Monday night, the Ways and Means Committee approved and forwarded to the City Council the package of agreements that will bring pension reform to Providence. As I reported previously, the administration calculated that the compromise settlement would produce \$18.5 million in annual savings, or around 85% of the \$21.5 million anticipated by the reform ordinance. The administration learned that its actuary overstated the annual savings by \$700,000, which has generated a lawsuit. Also, we learned that the agreement requires adding another year to existing collective bargaining agreements with the fire and police unions, which will postpone further reforms by another year. I am preparing an ordinance to prevent future extensions of collective bargaining agreements for more than three years into the future. At the current time, however, I voted to approve the settlement package because of the importance of pension reform in Providence.

On Thursday night, the City Council debated and passed a unanimously a resolution I drafted urging the State to reconsider the introduction of “high stakes testing” as a diploma requirement for next year’s graduating seniors. You can read the resolution by clicking here: [NECAP Resolution](#). The resolution raises a number of issues, including (1) the NECAP’s authors designed it as a diagnostic test, and instructed educators not to use it as a “high stakes” test, (2) approximately 1,000 of Providence’s 11<sup>th</sup> graders (including more than 200 each of special education and English language learner students) failed to achieve the cutoff score, and face the risk of being denied diplomas next year, and (3) other states with “high stakes testing” either use it to support additional diplomas (New York’s Regents Diploma) or make significantly greater investments in school programs before imposing this requirement (Massachusetts). As part of my efforts, I accepted the Providence Student Union’s invitation to take the sample NECAP test, on which most adults failed to achieve a passing grade. While the Providence Student Union’s event was more for publicity than anything else, I believe the Commissioner of Education’s response (calling it an “outrageous act of irresponsibility”) was not helpful. Instead, the State should take seriously the fact that our children are not ready for this test next year, and the experiment we are undertaking could harm children’s lives.

Also on Thursday night, the City Council voted to override the Mayor’s veto of a special ordinance to allow a particular individual’s disability application to move forward despite the expiration of the general ordinance’s 18-month deadline. (I and three colleagues voted against the original special ordinance and against the override.) After the City Council’s vote, the Mayor stated, “We have worked tirelessly and accomplished much to put Providence on a path toward a brighter future. Now is not the time to start turning back the clock on how Providence does its business.” The Mayor was correct. Under City ordinance, applicants for disability pensions have an 18-month deadline after their injury to apply. The ordinance was enacted in the 1990’s after a history of inappropriate pensions awarded by the Retirement Board. In recent years, the City Council has enacted several special ordinances to override the 18-month rule in individual cases at the request of the affected employee. This is a poor practice for a legislative body, which is supposed to set broad policy and leave individual determinations to the administration. This type of special legislation allows the politically connected to obtain favorable application of what are supposed to be clear legal guidelines. This experience also shows we cannot take the City Council’s actions for granted. I will continue to do my best to make decisions in the best interest of the City as a whole and to encourage my colleagues to do the same.



In the coming week, the Jewish and Christian communities celebrate major holidays to mark freedom and renewal, two fundamental values that these traditions link with the arrival of Spring each year. I hope you have a happy and meaningful Passover and Easter, and that we all enter the new season with renewed commitment and vitality.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Samuel D. Zurier". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized "S" and "Z".