

March 4, 2018

Dear Fellow East Siders:

The recent storm wiped out the electricity for me and many of us living east of Wayland Avenue. I hope our power returns soon, and that those of you who also were hit enjoyed or are enjoying the adventure of living “off the grid.” This week’s letter discusses school safety, community-police relations and reducing the City’s environmental footprint of single-use plastic bags.

Last Tuesday night, the Special Committee on School Department Oversight met with officials from the Police Department, the School Department and the School Board to review the current program to protect the safety of our children in the wake of the recent tragedy in Parkdale, Florida. We learned that our City’s experience demonstrates that most potential assailants provide advance warnings (through discussions with friends, social media posts, or other ways) before acting. As a result, the Police Department has made a major investment in strengthening community ties to allow anyone with knowledge of a potential risk to be comfortable stepping up and passing that information along for the good of the community. The Committee also learned of recent measures to control access to school buildings, which some visitors (such as parents) find inconvenient and annoying, but are an important line of defense. On the other hand, the Police and School Departments see less value in trying to scare or intimidate would-be shooters (with armed guards, for example), as these measures also may reduce other students’ sense of safety and security. The School Department also has some capacity to support the students’ emotional well-being through counseling and other support services to redirect insecure and troubled students towards a more positive experience. They believe this support network has helped prevent many potential tragedies from occurring. In the wake of Parkdale, the School Board is reviewing its policies and procedures to look for areas of further improvement.

At last Thursday’s meeting, the City Council elected a slate of community members to serve on the board of the Providence External Review Authority, or PERA. More than 40 people applied (including several from our neighborhood). The eight who were elected are: Dr. Jorge C. Armesto, a forensic and clinical psychologist; Phanida Phivilay Bessette, a program manager for the Rhode Island Executive Office of Health and Human Services; Kenneth Cohen, a former Providence police lieutenant; Susan DeRita, development officer at St. Mary’s Home for Children; Alison Eichler, the president of the board of directors for Sophia Academy; Nick Figueroa, executive director at College Visions; Machiste Rankin, a former correctional officer; and Deborah Wray, a longtime community activist. I know many highly qualified people did not make the cut, but I also believe the group who will serve is also very well qualified, and as a group present a broad cross-section of backgrounds, experiences and skills. These Board members appear to be capable of adding another layer of protection for citizens in their interactions with police in a process that will lead to constructive solutions rather than increasing tensions. If they are successful, we all will benefit.

Also at last Thursday’s meeting, the City Council gave initial passage to an ordinance to reduce the number of single-use plastic bags issued by retail establishments. If passed, the ordinance will require stores to charge a 10 cent per bag fee, which shoppers can avoid by bringing in their own bags. Unlike some other cities’ ordinances, this one imposes the 10-cent fee whether the bag is paper or plastic, with the goal of encouraging people to reuse their bags. Shop owners will retain the fees collected, reducing the burden of this change. Also, the City will distribute reusable bags during a 12-month education/transition program designed to educate people about the new rules. Currently, these plastic bags are a major source of litter, water pollution and increased landfill fees as people mistakenly include them in their recycling bins. The 12-month transition/education program will mitigate the impacts on small businesses.

Sincerely,

*Samuel D. Zurier*

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