

July 17, 2016

Dear Fellow East Siders:

This summer has brought tragedy both domestically and internationally, reducing the significance of the issues we face here in Providence. I hope we all maintain that broader perspective. With that said, the City's work continues, and this letter discusses water quality testing in our public schools and initial discussions in the Finance Committee about the City's infrastructure bond proposal.

This past Wednesday night (July 13), the Special Committee on Education received a [Report](#) concerning the quality of drinking water in the City's 17 elementary schools and 6 middle schools. The report found that all the elementary schools and five of the six middle schools had safe levels of lead and iron in the drinking water. The reports also revealed that the West Broadway Middle School had unsafe levels of lead in a drinking fountain. The City plans to replace the piping for that fountain, and conduct more extensive tests throughout the school over the summer to ensure that it is completely safe by the time school resumes this fall. The City indicated it also will test the high schools in the future. With that said, the testing of the elementary and middle schools was undertaken with greater urgency, as small children in particular are most vulnerable to lead poisoning. During the 1990's, there was a legal requirement to test all schools every year; however, that requirement expired after schools completed extensive remedial work.

On Thursday night (July 14), the administration began its discussion with the Finance Committee concerning its proposed \$40 million infrastructure bond. The administration's version called for the money to be spent on projects based on rubrics developed from objective criteria (such as the one engineers developed for the 2012 road construction bond); however, the Finance Committee introduced an [alternative version](#) that would create fifteen \$1.5 million discretionary accounts to be controlled at the whim of individual City Council members. The Finance Committee Chair made a point of presenting a [previous bond ordinance](#) in which the Cianci administration and the City Council collaborated (or, perhaps, more accurately, conspired) in exactly this way in 1996 and again in 2000. The 1996 bond produced a number of abuses documented in a [Providence Phoenix article](#). There have been other City Council abuses of discretionary accounts since that time. In 2013, [WPRI reported](#) on the City Council's discretionary grant program (also known as "contingency funds"), which directed more than \$200,000 in grants without oversight during 2006-13, including \$23,000 to the Providence Cobras. Also last week, a sitting City Council member was indicted for embezzling more than \$127,000 from the Providence Cobras, who received City funding at his urging. After that member's arrest in May, I sponsored a resolution the City Council approved to audit the entire contingency grant program for the past decade. In short, the Finance Committee's recommended change goes beyond bad judgment to chutzpah. The two key elements of any criminal prosecution are opportunity and motive, and the City Council has a track record of misusing discretionary funds when provided the opportunity. As much as the City urgently needs infrastructure funding, I will be spending the next few weeks doing everything I can to remove this discretionary element, which would waste the taxpayer's money and undermine further the public trust.

Sincerely,

Samuel D. Zurier
