

SAM ZURIER

August 30, 2011

Dear Fellow East Siders:

I hope you are digging out from the hurricane. I just had my electricity restored, allowing me to resume my letters to constituents.

With all the road work happening around the City this summer, it is a frustration to many of us to have cracked and damaged sidewalks that have been on the City's sidewalk repair list for several years but have not been repaired. There are more than 200 houses from our neighborhood (Ward 2) on that list, with some of those requests dating back to the early 1990's.

The reason for this inadequate level of service is that the City allocates only a token amount of money from its annual operating budget to repair sidewalks. In this way, the City fails to provide an important service to its residents and opens up the possibility of injuries and lawsuits. This unfortunate state of affairs is the result of years of financial stress which culminated this year in a \$70 million deficit that the City Council had to help close for the fiscal year ending June 30, and a \$110 million anticipated deficit for the fiscal year that began on July 1. A better budget would have operating funds for this type of infrastructure maintenance and repair, and it is my hope that once the City's finances stabilize in a few years we can return to a more responsible program.

In the meantime, sidewalk repairs in recent years have been funded from three principal sources. The first was in the late 1990's and early 2000's when the City issued two bonds of \$50 million each, each of which included an allocation of around \$2 million to each of the City's 15 wards for projects (including sidewalk repairs) approved by individual Council representatives. These funds were depleted in our Ward several years ago. I do not believe it makes sense to borrow capital funds to pay for operating expenses, and we will continue to pay of these bonds for many years. At this point, nobody will lend Providence any more money anyway.

The second source is from occasional asset sales, such as when Providence sold the Convention Center. That sale produced an allocation of \$250,000 per ward. Approximately \$100,000 remained in that account when I took office in January, of which my predecessor had committed approximately \$22,000 to an ongoing project. Given that the average to repair a sidewalk is between \$5,000 and \$10,000, the balance could fund the construction or repair of between 8 and 16 sidewalks. There is no prospect of any future similar asset sales in the next few years.

The third source is the federal block grant program, which distributes funds annually to neighborhoods with a sufficient incidence of poverty. Providence has 15 City Council wards, and 14 of them have sufficient residents in poverty to qualify for federal funds. Those 14 wards each receive an annual grant of federal funds of approximately \$500,000 to \$600,000. Unfortunately, we live in the only ward that does not qualify for federal funds. As a result, we can see many sidewalks and roads being repaired elsewhere in the City without seeing any similar work being done in our neighborhood.

These circumstances combine to create conditions that are both unfortunate and unfair for people in our neighborhood. The common practice (and better policy) is to have an adequate infrastructure budget, and it is

my hope over the coming years to help move the City in that direction. (This will take time, because many prior years of mismanagement have left the City's cupboard bare with regard to other compelling investments, such as a "rainy day" fund equal to 5% of the City's budget. We has such a fund until 2008, when the prior administration spent the money without Council authorization. We could have used such a fund this year, had it not been completely spent down in the preceding years.)

This summer, I approved a single \$4,500 expenditure from the \$80,000 remaining in the Ward 2 account. The owner of the house in question was in a serious accident and is now a paraplegic. I intend to be conservative with future allocations so that funds will remain available for extreme cases such as the one I encountered this summer.

I am sorry that I do not have a better program or explanation for a City failure that affects our quality of life, but I plan to work on the issue over the coming years. I encourage you, as citizens, to continue to advocate for an adequate infrastructure budget for the City.

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'.