

SAM ZURIER

Dear Friends:

I wish to share some thoughts about the events of the past month in our City, most of which have emanated from the March 3 report of the Municipal Finance Review Panel, which found that our City's "structural deficit" would be \$70 million this year and \$110 million next year. (The "structural deficit" is the shortfall we would have if we did not borrow any money.) Even with the borrowing that already has taken place this year, the Review Panel found that we will end this year with a \$28 million deficit unless we take further measures to address it. I believe the Review Panel's numbers are accurate, and that the Mayor's call for shared sacrifice is appropriate. He began by reducing his own salary and imposing a furlough day on his staff. He announced immediate staff reductions of higher level managers in the municipal government and the School Department. He is now seeking to cut expenditures for the current year through concession bargaining with municipal unions. He also is preparing a budget for next year that he plans to submit to the City Council by the end of April.

To create room for savings in next year's school budget, the Mayor sent dismissal notices to all school teachers in late February. Those dismissal notices are tied to a plan he announced on March 14 to close four schools and reconfigure two others. The closure plan is subject to a public hearing process, but his preliminary data indicates that the closures will reduce the number of teachers by between 40 and 70. He found it necessary to send dismissal notices to all teachers in February because (a) there is a State law that prohibits layoffs or dismissals without sending letters by March 1, and (b) there are various seniority-based "bumping" rules the Providence Teachers Union seeks to apply that could affect the jobs of many teachers beyond those in any school that closes. When the process is over, all but a fraction of our teachers will retain their positions; however, we will not know for a month or two (and in a few cases beyond that) precisely which teachers are in which group. This has caused understandable anxiety for our teachers, many of whom are showing admirable professionalism and courage in challenging times. Ironically, we must ask this from our teachers because of a poorly conceived state law that imposes a March 1 deadline on such notices, instead of a more reasonable date such as June 1. The unnecessary panic this law caused in Providence this year may finally lead to its repeal in the General Assembly.

Unfortunately, the teachers' anxiety only increased when the leadership of the Providence Teachers Union spread the canard that the Mayor is engaging in "union busting", an unjustified smear of a good man. The Providence Journal referred to the Providence Teachers Union leadership's statements as "obligatory denunciations" in its editorial supporting the Mayor. While I agree with the rest of the Journal's editorial, I disagree with the notion that these denunciations are obligatory. These outbursts harm the good name of both the intended target and the person who utters them. Eight years ago, Alan Dershowitz accused the Federal judges in Rhode Island of being anti-Semitic because they made three rulings in different cases that the lawyers did not like, and some of the lawyers in question happened to be Jewish. This was a preposterous, inflammatory and damaging charge. I organized a group of Jewish lawyers in Rhode Island to renounce the charge and stand up for the integrity of our judges. I did so not only because the accusation was unfair to the judges, but also because the statement demeaned the Jewish community by making us appear to be small-minded people who viewed the entire world through a single, skewed lens.

In identifying the scope of the sacrifices we all will need to share, it will be important for the City to hear from each affected party. As each party expresses its concerns, it may help to shape the set of solutions in a way that is more fair to the affected party but consistent with the overall needs of the City. With that said, however, I hope that everyone will participate in this process with an understanding that nobody can be exempt from shared sacrifice, and that we will have our best chance to succeed if everyone adopts a constructive tone. It is my hope that each of the parties affected by the City's profound challenges will avoid the temptation to resort to what I would consider to be gratuitous and harmful denunciations. Goodness knows, our work together to address the City's profound problems will be difficult enough without creating factional conflict. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

