

State of the City Address
City Council Speaker Christine C. Quinn
Thursday, February 15, 2007

I want to thank all of you, and all of my colleagues, all of our community partners and advocates in this room, for making this such a great first year for me as Speaker.... and such a positive and productive year for our City.

And Mayor Bloomberg, I too would like to thank you for being a true partner in government.

One of America's greatest heroes, Jackie Robinson, said "A life isn't significant except for its impact on other lives."

It's a wonderful quote that captures what public service is all about.

All of us are here to make a difference....to help solve people's problems.

In an effort to become more relevant and more effective, we've taken an honest look at ourselves and how we do business...

We've acknowledged that some things we did weren't really working.

And we made changes.

We put aside differences, whether party, ego or anything else... to work together to improve our city.

We've been up front with each other -- and with the Mayor -- about what we think is right and what we think is wrong for New York City.

We focused on progress, not politics, and we took steps to reinforce our commitment to good government.

We didn't agree on every issue all the time - but we showed the public is best served when government puts collaboration over conflict.

Thanks to so many in this room, these reforms and this new spirit of cooperation have produced real achievements – and have made this a more livable City.

There's probably no better example of the Council's new approach, than the passage of the citywide garbage plan.

For too long, a few neighborhoods – predominantly poor and of color – bore the health and environmental consequences of storing the City's garbage or having it shipped through their backyards.

Now, it might have been easier for these 51 members to take a “not in my backyard” approach, but that wouldn't have solved this decades-old problem.

Instead we came together -- under the leadership of Mike McMahon -- to pass a plan that took more garbage trucks off the road and was fair to all five boroughs.

Time and time again, we've come together to find common ground to solve community problems.

When a series of tragedies put nightclubs on page one, the Council -- led by Peter Vallone and Melinda Katz -- did more than pursue headlines, we worked together to make New York nightlife safer.

When we found out that the City's Finest didn't have the highest quality bullet proof vests...together with Vinnie Gentile and Maria Baez, we made *THEIR* protection *OUR* priority.

And as a result of our efforts, 18,000 police officers now have the best bullet proof vests money can buy.

When we learned the New York City Housing Authority was in financial trouble, we fought for and -- thanks to Rosie Mendez and Melissa Mark Viverito -- we secured Section 8 vouchers for 2,300 families.

We set a long-term goal to cut the number of hungry New Yorkers in half and to bring healthier food to every community... and we've made real progress.

Just a year later, as a result our advocacy, the City has a brand new approach.

The Mayor's Office has hired a Citywide Food Policy Coordinator.

More needy families are receiving food stamps and more green markets are accepting them, thanks to Eric Gioia, Bill DeBlasio and Betsy Gotbaum.

We have a long way to go, but we've laid real groundwork for achieving this ambitious goal.

By getting things done, by keeping our word, we've increased people's faith in government.

That's why instead of sticking to the status quo, this Council embraced reform and made real changes to restore people's faith in the power of government.

We changed the lobbying laws to erase any perception of special influence on the work of this body.

We brought the Council into the communities we represent, so everyday New Yorkers could get more involved in their government and in setting our priorities.

People work for a living.

They don't have time to take an afternoon off and schlep to City Hall for a hearing...so we went to them – holding public meetings from Flatbush to Flushing.

We also improved the Council's operating rules so we could become more democratic and more professional.

And now, we must build on all this progress, by reforming our campaign finance system so the public can see -- we're looking out for their interests, not anyone else's.

New York City has one of the best campaign finance programs in the nation...

...but there is still a sense of special influence and unfairness.

It undermines the integrity of the system in the eyes of the public and those that run for office.

Contributions by those who do business with the city must be restricted.

Loopholes in the ban on corporate contributions must be closed.

And candidates who abide by the rules must get quicker and clearer decisions from the Campaign Finance Board.

Simcha Felder and I, working with the Mayor, will introduce legislation in the coming weeks that will make needed reforms and enhance candidate participation in the public finance system.

Making government work for New Yorkers is about more than just reforming lobbying or campaign finance laws.

Effective government is about making a connection to the problems people face in their everyday lives.

Last year, we announced CouncilStat, a new tool to identify and respond to shortfalls in government services.

Now I know that combining tens of thousands of constituent concerns -- from 51 district offices into one central database is not necessarily a headline grabbing concept.

But CouncilStat will let us see when one constituent call is more than an isolated problem – when it’s actually part of a larger trend that requires a legislative, budget or policy response.

This spring, CouncilStat will be operating in five districts – one in each borough.

And by the end of the year, it will be in every district office, providing the Council with a snapshot of gaps in government services, and allowing us to develop citywide responses to citywide problems.

CouncilStat and the Mayor’s 311 allow citizens to directly report problems to government.

But government doesn’t have the same ability to communicate directly with the public.

If there’s an emergency and we need to get information out fast – we still rely on third parties, like the media — or on outdated technology like the emergency broadcast system.

It's amazing, that in this day and age of cellphones and blackberries, we're still relying on something from the cold war.

Partnering with the Mayor, we are going to develop a new emergency response system... one that can get real time information directly to New Yorkers.

A year ago we spoke about ending the annual budget dance with the Mayor.

This issue is about much more than the back and forth of symbolic cuts and restorations.

The budget dance is bad government; it detracts from our responsibility to be stewards of the taxpayer's dollars... to make sure we root out waste and identify unnecessary spending.

Thanks to the hard work of all my colleagues, funding for libraries, summer youth jobs, trash pick up, arts organizations, the CCRB, parks maintenance and family day care are now in the baseline of the budget.

Now we're not quite ready to spin Donna Summer's Last Dance, but the curtain is finally starting to come down.

Addressing the budget dance will allow us to connect the budget to the long-term needs of the City; from housing to education -- from public safety to infrastructure.

We'll also identify needed cuts, from outdated programs to government waste.

We are committed to making responsible choices on both sides of the budget ledger.

Today, our city is enjoying a tremendous fiscal boom...

Wall Street is thriving and record numbers of tourists are visiting.

But unfortunately, no fiscal boom lasts forever.

And in the good times, you need to save money.

It's not rocket science.

It's common sense.

Families do it, businesses do it, ... even squirrels save nuts for the winter!

New York City may be the only entity – human, governmental or animal -- that is **literally** prohibited from saving its own money.

This didn't start out as some sinister plan to handcuff New York City.

When the City was on the verge of bankruptcy thirty years ago, a balanced budget was one of the appropriate fiscal constraints that helped save the day.

For the City's own good, it was required to spend only what it took in – nothing more and nothing less.

Back then, it was the right thing to do.

But now it's thirty years later -- the Berlin Wall fell, bellbottoms came out of -- and back into -- style, and the first of the MTV generation are about to get their AARP cards.

A lot's changed – so should this.

As we saw after the September 11th attacks, without a rainy day fund, there's no choice when times are bad -- but to cut services or raise taxes.

This savings prohibition is a relic of a bygone era.

And I am pleased to announce that at my request -- Senator Diane Savino and Assemblymember Denny Farrell have agreed to sponsor legislation in Albany to create a New York City Rainy Day Fund.

Today, the City's fiscal health is very strong...probably stronger than at any point in recent history.

The treasury is flush -- but not every resident is sharing in this great prosperity.

While some are accumulating extraordinary wealth; there are plenty of others struggling to stay afloat ...to stay afloat in a city that is becoming more and more expensive.

We've heard this over and over again - in almost every community conversation we had - whether with Inez Dickens in Harlem, Domenic Recchia in Bensonhurst, Leroy Comrie in Jamaica or Maria Arroyo in Melrose.

There is a growing sense across the boroughs that the day is coming when the men and women who protect us, who teach our children, who take care of our parents, and who serve our coffee won't be able to afford to live in New York City.

And middle class neighborhoods are quietly but steadily disappearing from the city's landscape.

In 1970, they made up nearly 50% of the City; in 2000, it was 30%. And the numbers are decreasing every year.

The issue isn't how much some investment banker made.

or that certain businesses are doing too well.

But the success of New York City can't be judged solely by the success of Wall Street or Sotheby's.

We want them to do very, very well – but they really aren't looking to Chris Quinn or the Council for help.

It's everyday New Yorkers – bus drivers, nurses, construction workers, and small business owners – that need our help to deal with the rising cost of living.

President John F Kennedy said – a rising tide lifts all boats.

But I'm worried that if we don't do something -- this rising tide is going to push a lot of boats right out into the Atlantic Ocean...

In the year ahead, all of us must work together to keep the middle class and those striving to get there from being squeezed out of our city --- a city that desperately needs them.

The greatest financial burden on New Yorkers is housing – an issue my colleagues and I hear time and time again.

The cost of housing was the region's main driver of inflation last year.

You don't have to be an economist to understand that housing costs are a huge issue for most New Yorkers.

Just look at the long lines when additional Section 8 vouchers were recently announced.

This is a huge crisis staring us right in the face.

Mayor Bloomberg & Housing Commissioner Shaun Donovan have put forward an ambitious plan to create and preserve 165,000 units of housing.

I support that goal one hundred percent.

But this plan alone is not enough...we need a further commitment and a lot of collaboration....

the kind we demonstrated when we reformed the 421-a tax exemption program.

Under the leadership of Erik Dilan, we took an existing tax break and we made it a more effective tool for affordable housing and economic development.

Instead of advocating one extreme or the other and ending up with nothing, we reached a compromise –

-- a compromise that promoted good policy and **will** become law.

After September 11th,
we had to raise property taxes.

But we made a promise –

-- a promise to reduce those taxes when times were better.

Now times are better.

And we'll work with the Mayor to make good on that commitment.

But home owners aren't the only ones who sacrificed for the good of our city.

For most, New York City is a city of renters... millions of New Yorkers who live paycheck to paycheck; never getting a bonus; lucky to get a raise; doing the jobs that make our city run.

They are facing the same housing pressures... But they keep getting the short end of the stick.

When property taxes go up, their rents go up too... because their landlords pass higher costs on to them.

2/3 of our residents rent their homes - and for too long, they've been forgotten -- and ignored when it comes to tax relief.

They've not benefited from the rebates or the tax breaks owning a home can bring.

In a year with a larger than anticipated surplus, it's finally time --- time for the City's renters to receive some long overdue help.

Today, I am proposing a renters tax break.

Our plan will provide a \$300 credit for working families.

And 1.1 million tenants will benefit.

A home is a home, whether you rent it or you own it.

So when we go to Albany, it will be for tenants and homeowners alike.

But tax relief is only a part of the equation --- too many affordable apartments are being lost -- because of weakened rent protections, landlord neglect and the soaring cost of real estate.

Just look at what happened at Stuy Town and Peter Cooper.

This - despite the dogged and valiant effort of

Dan Garodnick and the tenants association.

If we keep losing the existing housing stock, it doesn't matter how much new affordable housing we build.

That's why we'll work with Charles Barron and the residents of Starrett City in their fight to preserve their community and their way of life.

This year, we'll also launch a renewed campaign in Albany to force the repeal of Urstadt and regain our control over New York City's rent protection laws.

And right here at home, we'll pass 2 landmark laws to protect tenants against harassment and to make sure that New York City apartments are kept in livable condition.

The vast majority of landlords are law abiding, responsible citizens. This historic overhaul won't affect them at all.

But let me be clear... if you are one of the bad actors, consider yourself forewarned – things are going to be a lot different.

We've all heard the horror stories.

Hot water that is suddenly ice cold, routine repairs that are never scheduled.

Tenants can't leave -- because they've got nowhere to go.

And under the existing laws, they have little option except to complain to the very person causing the problem.

If they have the resources - they can take a landlord to court for each and every individual violation - but they are helpless against a pattern of harassment.

Until now...

This year, the Council will pass a law that will give a tenant a legal cause of action in housing court to fight harassment.

But to really get at the bad buildings, the ones that are downright dangerous, we need to drastically change the City's approach and give HPD the power to better enforce the housing maintenance code.

Over the past year, in a true example of cooperation, we've been working with Tish James, the City, the rent stabilization association, and tenant advocates to develop a new legislative solution to this old problem.

We are no longer going to wait for landlords to fix the problems they've caused.

And we're not going to settle for superficial fixes anymore.

Landlords will be given a window to make repairs...a limited window.

If they don't - the City will step in and do the work... at the landlord's expense.

These repairs won't be restricted to the specific problem.

It is no longer going to be sufficient to plug a leak -- if the problem is caused by a faulty plumbing system.

From top to bottom, HPD will identify the systemic causes of the problems, fix them *and* prevent them from happening again.

Once repairs are finalized - we won't just walk away.

We will continue working with the tenants and the landlords to make sure the necessary upkeep is maintained.

Together, these two pieces of legislation -- and our work with HPD-- will mark a new era of tenant empowerment in our city.... and put a renewed emphasis on the P in the Department of Housing, *Preservation* and Development.

The majority of tenants rent because they can't afford to buy.

If we really want to move people into the middle class, we need to help more New Yorkers become homeowners.

The City has a good program to help first time buyers with down payments.

But it's limited to residents earning less than \$57,000 a year.

There are a lot of families in New York making more than that who need financial assistance if they are ever going to afford a home.

So I am proposing to create the Renters to Owners Opportunity Fund – ROOF -- a new program to provide down payment assistance for middle class families making up to \$92,000.

Families will of course have to invest their own savings to match the City's contribution but together, we'll connect the dream of home ownership to a lot more New Yorkers.

For every generation, education and public schools have been the pathway to the American dream.

The Mayor and Chancellor Klein have brought renewed energy and focus to our public school system.

Our schools are better for it.

I support their goals of increasing accountability and improving results.

But I have real concerns about the latest restructuring proposal.

Holding principals accountable for the success of their schools is a great idea – but we need to make sure they're up to the job - and have the right training and meaningful involvement of their school leadership team, so they can really handle the additional responsibilities.

The school funding formula is ripe for an overhaul -- but before we implement changes, let's make sure any new plan treats all students fairly – from ELL to gifted and talented to kids that need a little extra help.

These proposals may be just what our schools need – but since there are many unanswered questions from parents, educators and advocates, let's make sure we find the most effective changes and decide how, and when, to implement them...**together.**

The issue before the school system isn't whether to change; we all know changes are necessary.

But we need to make sure the right changes are made -- in the right way.

One thing we hear so often from parents -- is that the education system isn't responsive to their kids needs.

Despite the best intentions, what the Department of Education is doing to involve and inform parents just isn't working.

Parents are confused, frustrated, and too often angry because they don't know where to turn for help.

Choosing the right school is a particularly torturous process.

Applying to middle school makes solving the DaVinci Code look simple.

Something's got to give. We've got to find a better way.

That's why today, I am proposing that we establish school navigators throughout the city.

These individuals will specialize in explaining the transition process for elementary, middle or high school.

School navigators will complement the work of guidance counselors, and the DOE's student placement efforts.

When a parent has a question about the application process

or which school is best for their child,

there'll be a specialist in their neighborhood whose sole job -- is to provide information and support during this process.

Engagement, cooperation and just plain dialogue will always achieve better results -- whether it's between the Council and the Mayor or schools and parents.

In the past year, we saw historic progress for New York City schools in the area of funding.

After many years in court, our students will finally receive more education funding from Albany.

We all stood together -- Robert Jackson, the Mayor, Governor Spitzer, Speaker Silver, parents, teachers, principals and the Council -- and we prevailed in the Campaign for Fiscal Equity.

Now, we can go to work to reduce class size at every level in every borough.

But before our kids get to elementary school, we need to give them the strongest educational foundation possible.

New York City has a great universal pre k program to build on.

But the vast majority of children are still in half day pre kindergarten -- that's just 2 ½ hours a day.

Kids barely have time to get their jackets off before we're sending them home.

Last year, the Council fought for -- and won -- full day slots for 2200 more children.

But we won't be satisfied until every family who needs full-day pre kindergarten can get it.

All of us who care about education need to think of better ways -- like smaller classes and full day pre k - to teach our children.

And now, with new funding, it's exactly the right time to be considering new approaches.

No place needs more new thinking than middle school education.

Our middle schools are failing.

We're losing too many kids between elementary and high school.

And if we lose them there - it's a short road to high school drop out and a lifetime of limited opportunity.

We need to re-build our middle schools -- so they can be a path to the middle class for the next generation of New Yorkers.

That's why the Council is appointing a Middle School Task Force to be chaired by two distinguished New Yorkers who are here with us today.

Doctors Pedro Noguera and Charlotte Frank.

The Task Force will be made up of educators, parents, business leaders and experts, including the Coalition for Educational Justice.

They'll be charged with coming up with the best ideas and best practices.

When their work is complete in a few months, we'll have a blueprint for middle school reform that will finally give our students the top quality schools they deserve.

Despite all the attention and money being spent on health care in America, we still haven't found a way to provide affordable and accessible care to everyone.

Right now, the way we deliver health care in New York and all across the country is upside down.

Too much money gets spent on expensive in-patient care once people get sick.

Not nearly enough gets spent on the preventive primary care that keeps us healthy.

Tough as it is to say...

There are simply too many hospital beds in New York City.

That's why I support the effort to consolidate services and right size our State's healthcare system.

But that's only part of the equation.

Right-sizing also means we have to address the lack of access to primary care at the same time.

This reality has been noted by the Chair of our Health Committee, Joel Rivera, and the Chair of Hospital Closings Task Force, Helen Sears.

There are too many neighborhoods, especially in low-income and isolated areas, where you can't find a primary care doctor or a full service clinic anywhere.

And *it's* those neighborhoods that will be most hurt by the misguided healthcare cuts being proposed in Washington and in Albany.

To change that, and help expand access to primary care, I am proposing that we create 10 state of the art healthcare facilities in high-need communities over the next five years.

These clinics will be patient-centered, offering the highest quality of care, from top of the line technology to the best-trained nurses and doctors.

And of course, we'll match language and cultural competencies with the local population.

These centers will save taxpayers' dollars by giving New Yorkers a better option than emergency rooms for basic care.

And they will help ensure that more New Yorkers have access to the kind of first-rate preventive health care that so many of us take for granted.

I'd be remiss without addressing one final important issue.

New York City has a great police force.

Men and women who risk their lives -- and too often give their lives -- protecting us.

Their work has made New York City the safest big city in America.

All of us should feel safer every time we see the NYPD blue.

But the sad reality is, not all of us do.

A tragic death this fall highlighted police community tensions; tensions that rise and fall but never seem to go entirely away.

Some believe it's not our role to address this issue.
But this is too important.

So we'll ask tough questions, we'll demand honest answers and we'll provide strong, thoughtful oversight.

This council is going to work fairly and constructively -- with our communities and the Bloomberg Administration -- toward the day when the only New Yorker who sees a squad car in their neighborhood and feels anything but comfort is a criminal who broke the law.

I've spent a year working in these five boroughs, and I've met a lot of New Yorkers.

Let me tell you, I believe in this City and I'm in awe of the power of its people.

Our City is one so full of hope and opportunity that it's almost mythical.

For hundreds of years, immigrants have come here from all over the globe to pursue their dreams.

Generation after generation has built New York into an amazing melting pot of human, economic and cultural power.

Their hard work has brought us tremendous success...

Our City is truly doing so well!

If we continue to focus on solutions, not politics... Seek cooperation instead of competition... Strive every day to have a real impact on the lives of others... And always ask, "How can we help you?"

Then our rising tide will finally lift all boats.

Thank you.