

New York City Council Speaker Christine C. Quinn
Budget Response

Remarks as delivered

April 6, 2006

Spring is in the air.

March Madness is over.

The Mets and Yankees are playing for keeps.

And the Knicks...well...not so much...

As we look at neighborhoods and communities across New York, one cannot help but feel optimistic about how far we've come and where we are headed as a city.

Crime is down to record lows.

The unemployment rate is the lowest it's been since before 9/11 and more New Yorkers have jobs than ever before.

We still have a long way to go, but our schools are getting better.

On housing, we are beginning to deal with the crisis that affects so many across the economic spectrum.

And we are budgeting wisely and responsibly for the future.

Now, the folks on the other side of City Hall certainly deserve a lot of credit for these gains.

But so does every one of the fifty-one members of the City Council here today. We should be proud of how we've helped lead New York through difficult times – from recession and budget deficits to economic boom and record surpluses.

We are the People's House and we work hard everyday to meet our constituents' needs and concerns...in all five boroughs...in every community from Stapleton to Mott Haven.

That's why, proud as we are of our achievements, we are not satisfied.

Make no mistake, we have a lot more work to do.

For too many New Yorkers, the City is simply not affordable...Hard working, taxpaying, middle-class families are being squeezed out.

The unemployment rate in many communities—especially among African-American and Latino men—remains unacceptably high.

And the least fortunate among us worry every day about getting the basic necessities – food, shelter and health care.

President Kennedy said that the time to repair the roof is when the sun is shining.

So now, while the sun is shining, we have the opportunity and the responsibility to make government better serve the people's needs.

We can – we must – make City Hall work even more effectively for our constituents.

We can listen harder and make government smarter.

We can expand programs that work and still demand accountability and results.

We can end the dysfunctional budget practices of the past and begin real oversight of City finances.

And, most importantly, we can learn from government's mistakes – and from tragedies – so that we do not repeat them.

Yes, we can be proud of achievements but we must not be satisfied.

That's why today in this speech and in the Council's formal budget response, we are outlining an ambitious, forward-looking agenda for kids, parents and seniors...to help businesses and to reform government...and to make all of us better Council Members for our constituents.

Study after study show how important it is for our kids to enter school ready to learn...that early childhood education is one of the most important factors in determining future success...it leads to higher math and reading scores and better school attendance – especially for children of low-income families.

In 1997, under the leadership of Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver, New York passed the New York State Universal Pre-Kindergarten Law with the goal of providing access to pre-k for every four-year-old.

Today, approximately 40,000 children are enrolled in the Department of Education's universal pre-k program. A vast majority of these, however, are only half-day programs.

For many single-parent families, or for families in which both parents work, this half-day approach falls short.

To truly give young children the opportunities they deserve, we must offer as many four-year-olds as possible access to full-day pre-k.

Over the next three years, we propose making all half-day pre-k slots a full-day, at a cost \$45 million a year.

Universal full-day pre-kindergarten is an attainable goal that will have a dramatic impact on the lives of our kids and assist our city's working families.

To truly make all schools work, we must also increase parental involvement.

Having parents play an active role in their children's education is key...and government must do everything it can to help them get involved and make it easy for them to get answers to critical questions.

How can my child transfer if they are unhappy with their school? What middle schools are in my neighborhood?

As council members, we hear from parents all the time...mothers and fathers who are looking for information that will affect their kid's futures.

This is one of the most crucial – and personally important – interactions between citizens and city government...and it is often one of the most frustrating.

Today, we propose adding \$1 million to help 311 so we can hire education specialists who will be able to help parents get answers and navigate the education bureaucracy.

311 is a terrific program..But 311 operators are not currently trained to answer parents' detailed questions. We need to change that.

To give every single New York City child a fair shot at success, however, we must make sure that every single New York City child has enough food to eat.

In this City of real estate booms and Wall Street bonuses too many children go to bed hungry. And too many wake up hungry...And too many go from one day to the next not knowing where their next meal will come from.

In 2004, an estimated 1.2 million New Yorkers—including more than 400,000 children—lived in hunger or in households where having food was always in question.

In this City of such extraordinary wealth that is simply unacceptable.

We, the richest City in the world, must be able to feed our people.

The first step is to make it easier for eligible New Yorkers to enroll in the Food Stamp program.

Right now, 600,000 people in the City qualify for food stamps but don't get them. The Administration has worked hard to enroll more families but we are still leaving nearly \$1 billion in federal aid on the table in Washington and not doing nearly enough to help hungry families

put food on the table right here in New York.

So, today, we're setting a goal of reducing the number of hungry New Yorkers by more than half. Over the next four years, we'll work to enroll 350,000 people in food stamps who already qualify but aren't getting them.

We're going to draw on some ideas from Council Member Eric Gioia and the Investigations Committee.

Let's allow people to apply for food stamps on-line, reduce the number of office visits, and get applications at every City funded food pantry and soup kitchen.

When parents sign their children up for free school meals we're going to make sure they know that they could qualify for food stamps, too, because the income requirements are exactly the same.

We're going to let them know where and how they can apply. And we're going to do the same for Medicaid eligible New Yorkers whenever they walk into one of the city's public hospitals.

To help implement these initiatives, we're allocating funds for a new city Office of Hunger and Nutrition to coordinate anti-hunger efforts.

By working across agencies, this office will also find solutions to the high rates of obesity that are plaguing our City, in particular low-income communities and children. This Office will work to bring healthier foods to all New Yorkers-- through increasing the number of farmers' markets and making sure they can accept food stamps—and support programs that encourage physical activity for our children.

In the Bible, Luke tells us "to whom much is given, much is required." In this City..in this day...every New Yorker must have access to three square meals, seven days a week..We can make this a reality.

It is our solemn duty as lawmakers to analyze and correct government's mistakes, shortcomings and sins of omission. These too often lead to human tragedies like hungry children....or like the death of seven-year-old Nixzmary Brown.

Mayor Bloomberg, Council Member Helen Foster and General Welfare Chair Bill DeBlasio have recommended smart and thoughtful changes in training and in the way the City treats high-risk cases like this one.

Today, we are proposing three initiatives that will help the City move faster and more effectively against child abuse.

First, we propose increased funding for child abuse units in the five District Attorney's offices. More resources will mean more thorough investigations and more rigorous prosecutions, and that means fewer at-risk kids.

Second, we propose expanded office hours at child advocacy centers in all five boroughs.

These centers are at the front lines of investigating abuse cases...ACS, the NYPD, prosecutors, doctors and nurses are all located within these facilities so that the abused can be treated and abusers brought to justice.

Finally, we propose adding preventive services programs at 21 more Beacons schools to provide a better link between social services and at risk families.

By taking these sensible steps, we can improve communications, investigations and prosecutions...and we can save lives.

Just as the Nixzmary Brown case tragically illustrated the need to constantly reevaluate and improve the way government works so did the murder of Brooklyn Police Officer Dillon Stewart.

Had he been wearing an up-to-date bulletproof vests...Dillon Stewart might still be alive today.

Council Members Maria Baez and Vinnie Gentile have been vocal advocates of giving our officers the equipment they need to do their jobs safely.

Today, we are proposing to spend \$9.9 million so that our officers can have up-to-date, secure protective vests. Vests that may save their lives one day.

I know I speak for a vast majority of New Yorkers in praising the Mayor's call to hire more police officers. Crime is down thanks in large part to the courage of the cops on the beat.

But as we all now know "In the criminal justice system, the people are represented by two separate yet equally important groups: the police, who investigate crime...and the district attorneys, who prosecute the offenders."

The district attorneys, and thousands of ADAs who work for the public good everyday, deserve a lot of credit for making this a city of law and order. And I'd like to recognize and applaud Queens District Attorney Richard Brown and Manhattan DA Bob Morgenthau – the real Adam Schiff.

We need to make sure they and all the city's district attorneys have the resources they need to do their jobs. This cause has been championed by Public Safety Chair Peter Vallone, and you know what, he's right.

That's why, today, we are calling for restoring \$17 million to the City's five district attorneys to begin to bring their funding back to pre 9/11 levels. There's simply no point in arresting more suspects if our district attorneys don't have the resources they need to fully and quickly prosecute them.

Making government work better for people means making it work smarter...it means learning from our mistakes...it means expanding programs that work...

And, yes, it means cutting taxes for individuals who need help most and companies that create jobs so that this City can continue to boom.

The Council has long advocated for property tax relief for seniors on fixed incomes. This year, Comptroller Bill Thompson, Council Members Leroy Comrie and Lew Fidler have proposed a rebate for low and middle-income seniors – a goal we all support.

The companies that need relief most -- the businesses that are the engine of our economic growth – aren't giant corporations, but small businesses in every borough and in every community.

To help these small businesses grow and thrive, the state and federal governments have long exempted them from corporate income and franchise taxes.

But in New York City, residents who own unincorporated businesses or S-corporations – many of these small companies – are taxed not once but twice.

For almost ten years, the Council has fought to correct this by providing a partial personal income tax credit for unincorporated business owners. Next year, we're proposing to expand it.

And we propose the creation of a new credit to S-Corporation owners who currently get no tax relief at all.

These tax credits will give business owners another reason to locate here...to grow here...and to create good jobs here.

While we pay special attention to small companies, we also need to take steps to promote and protect our manufacturing jobs. We don't assemble cars or airplanes, but in New York City there is a place for manufacturing in niche markets—like couture fashion, high-end furniture and printing.

This year, we're introducing a multi-faceted approach to strengthen New York City's manufacturing base:

- Creating investment tax credits for manufacturers that purchase new equipment;
- Expanding the Relocation Employment Assistance Program to include moves from areas recently rezoned for residential use;
- And increasing the Industrial Business Zone credit to \$3,000 per employee to encourage manufacturers to move into industrial areas.

Manufacturing jobs are good jobs that provide stable incomes and career paths for thousands of New Yorkers. We need to do everything we can to keep them here.

This year, the City faces a healthy surplus. It might be tempting to propose these tax credits and policy initiatives without regard to the bottom line. But it wouldn't be fiscally responsible.

That's why we have identified more than \$180 million dollars in the Mayor's budget that can be eliminated – including removing projected surplus funds associated with judgments and claims, delayed capital projects and the City's energy budget.

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

Finally, I want to end my remarks today by calling once again for a reform proposal that I believe will have a tremendous long-term impact in making government work better for people.

My colleagues, we must reform the budget process once and for all and put an end to the annual budget dance...this is the only way that we can truly end the culture of lobbying at City Hall and bring real accountability to government.

The annual budget dance has two partners and two steps.

The Mayor leads with an executive budget and proposed cuts. The Council follows with a response and proposed restorations. The list of cuts changes a bit from one year to the next and the amount swings with the City's economic fortunes. But the roles and the steps are the same year after year after year.

The whole thing feels a lot like the movie Groundhog Day.

The truth is, we end up fighting over only a tiny fraction of the City's budget.

The City Charter, when it was rewritten in 1989, envisioned something very different.

The Charter Revision Commission envisioned an expense budget in which every agency budget is broken out by particular program, purpose or activity, accompanied by statements of the goals each was designed to accomplish and the amount of funds allocated. The Administration was supposed to provide the City Council with explanations of the impact a proposed level of funding would have on those individual programs.

But that has never happened. The budget process today is virtually identical to the one the 1989 commission sought to reform.

For the most part, agency budgets are overly broad and don't detail individual programs.

In many agencies, all personnel funding is stuffed into a single budget line – instead of being broken out into individual units of appropriation. The descriptions of programmatic objectives are often nothing more than a list of the programs themselves.

So there's no transparency, no way for us to tell exactly how taxpayer dollars are being spent, and no way to ensure that we're doing all we can to meet New Yorkers current needs.

If agency budgets were presented in the way the charter mandates, the budget debate could truly be one about priorities. And Council committees could do a better job of oversight and more effectively evaluate programs throughout the year. Instead, we just go back to the same old budget dance.

Well, starting this year, under the leadership of Finance Chair David Weprin and together with Mayor Bloomberg we are going to end the dance.

We're going to reform the process and start clearing up the unit of appropriation muddle so that we can start evaluating every program and base funding decisions on these criteria:

- Does the program fill a real need?
- Is it serving people effectively?
- Is there better way to help New Yorkers?
- Has the program already served its purpose?
- Given the City's fiscal situation and the array of competing priorities, can we still afford the program? And at what level?

We're going to make spending decisions not based on who has the most connected lobbyist...but based on whether the program truly works.

Ending the budget dance is absolutely critical to bringing transparency to the budget itself...to protecting taxpayers and eliminating waste...and to better serving the New Yorkers we're elected to represent.

Yeah there were a few snowflakes yesterday but spring is in the air today...

Optimism abounds in the streets of our City and in this chamber.

New York has come a long way back but we won't rest until we bring it a lot further.

Now that the sun is shining, let us work together to repair the roofs of all New Yorkers.