

**STATE OF THE BOROUGH ADDRESS 2010**  
**Ruben Diaz Jr., Bronx Borough President**  
**March 5, 2010**

Jonas Bronck, our founder, first landed in the Bronx in 1639, bringing with him a small group of settlers to work on his farm, located at what is today 132<sup>nd</sup> Street and Lincoln Avenue. The Bronx would go on to play a major role in the founding of our great nation. Many Bronxites gave their lives fighting the American Revolution and Gouverneur Morris, a Bronx native, is credited with writing the preamble to our constitution, perhaps the most important document in the history of democratic government.

In the mid-1800's, the Bronx saw its first great wave of immigrants when severe famine in Ireland and political unrest in Germany sent waves of Europeans to our shores, a wave that would be repeated many times by groups from many different countries during the decades to come. The tenement dwellers of Manhattan and elsewhere saw the promise of the Bronx, and the suburban dream it represented, and rushed to it.

For too many, however, the history of the Bronx is that of the 1970's. Those years saw a great slide in our borough. Arson was the norm, and the crime rate here was astronomical compared to the rest of the city, if not the nation. During the next two decades, the Bronx saw millions of dollars in new investment, through direct government intervention and private partnerships, transforming once vacant lots into new opportunities. The last decade saw major corporate development in the Bronx, proving to all that the Bronx is a place where people want to do business, consumers want to spend money, and folks want to raise a family.

Our borough has come a long way. But we still have further to go. We know that the Bronx has seen tremendous improvement over the past three decades. But there is always room for more.

Statistics compiled by the United States Census Bureau show us that the poverty rate here is 28.3 percent, more than double the state and federal average. And our current unemployment rate is 13.9 percent, well above the national average and by far the highest in New York State. Only 21.6 percent of Bronxites own their own homes, compared to more than 55 percent of State residents and two-thirds of all Americans.

During my inauguration in May, I spoke of the concept of One Bronx—Un Solo Bronx—where we would all come together regardless of our differences to work for the greater good of the entire borough. One Bronx—Un Solo Bronx—where the good things in one community are good for us all, and the bad things in another community are equally bad for everyone. One Bronx is about standing side by side as one borough, to solve our problems and celebrate our successes together.

The spirit of “One Bronx” was on display a few weeks ago, following the devastating earthquake in Haiti. People from every corner of our borough, regardless of their race, age or ethnicity; came together to donate what they could—food, money, clothing—to help those in need, despite their own hardships. The outpouring of generosity from Bronxites in response to the crisis in Haiti made me proud to be your borough president.

“One Bronx” means we will take the lead on “LEED”—Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design—and work as a whole to build and grow the green economy, while making sure Bronxites are prepared to take these jobs.

“One Bronx” means that, when one of our mothers, our daughters, or our sisters is taken from us through an act of senseless violence, we all feel it together. And “One Bronx” means that when developers want to do business in our borough, they must do what is right for the entire Bronx, and not just themselves.

Our poverty rates, combined with our unemployment rates and these other statistics, show us just how far we have to go. My administration will bring the Bronx to the forefront of environmentally-friendly development, and we will take advantage of the benefits these jobs will create.

My push to build a greener economy is about more than just words. In the New York State Assembly I authored a law that gives developers tax breaks when they construct a green roof as part of their project.

My office has a sustainable development policy, and we will not provide any funds unless a project meets the highest possible level of environmental certification. In the last year my office funded a number of projects with major “green” components, such as the new library in Woodlawn, the award winning Via Verde mixed-use housing development in Oak Point, and Common Ground’s Brook Avenue Residence, which creates permanent housing for chronically homeless individuals. We are putting our money where our mouth is, quite literally, at Borough Hall.

Just a few weeks ago, we celebrated the announcement of a federal grant for the Consortium for Workers Education that will be used to train more than 400 Bronx residents for work in the growing field of energy efficiency. We are also working in conjunction with Senator Kirsten Gillibrand and Fordham University to bring a co-generation plant to the college’s Rose Hill campus. This project will lessen the burden on our electric grid, reduce pollution, and create dozens of new jobs. And, along with the promotion of other clean energy technologies, this project will be a significant step towards the development of an alternative power grid, leading to lower energy costs, right here in the Bronx.

I, along with Congressman Steve Israel, have co-founded the New York State Intergovernmental Energy Partnership, which is working to identify stimulus funding for green initiatives. And,

through the Bronx Overall Economic Development Corporation, this year my office placed in each of our borough's business improvement districts two "Big Bellys."

Have you seen the Big Belly yet? It's really amazing. When this garbage receptacle gets too full, a solar power press will activate and compact the trash inside. Because of this, the Big Belly is able to hold ten times the amount of garbage of a normal trash can. This means fewer pickups, which also means fewer trucks on the street. And these trash bins, which could represent the future of waste management in the United States, are manufactured right here on Tiffany Street, by my friend Franklin Cruz and his company, Direct Environmental.

You should know by now that I am serious about building the "green" economy, and these are just a few of the steps that we have already taken. My office will continue to work to expand green manufacturing opportunities in our industrial zones. We will encourage existing businesses to retrofit, and work to find incentives for them to do so. We can, and we will, create the blueprint—or should I say "greenprint"—to expand this emerging industry and lead the nation.

There are many great opportunities for development in the Bronx, and we will take advantage of them in the years to come. Our waterfront is virtually untouched, and with smart planning we can create new opportunities for housing, for economic development, and for recreation along our shores. I will push to expand the Empowerment Zone in our borough, so that more small businesses can benefit from the loans and other opportunities available through this program.

We need to make sure that more homeownership opportunities are afforded to Bronxites, in all neighborhoods. I am always happy when affordable housing is developed in the Bronx, but we must do more to ensure that new developments are built that offer Bronxites a chance to buy their homes. Homeownership leads to community stability, and my office will do all that it can to persuade developers to create more of those opportunities. A stable neighborhood is a better neighborhood, and more stability means a better Bronx.

Developers, however, do not bear the entire burden on this issue. I have been personally reaching out to our banking community to urge them to free up capital so that developers can make these projects a reality. We cannot make the dream of owning your own home come true without the proper funding, and I will continue to push banks to make money available to develop homeownership opportunities in our borough.

Last year my office's economic development arm, the Bronx Overall Economic Development Corporation, hosted the borough's first ever economic summit. At that event, business, community and not-for-profit leaders from every corner of the borough came together, as "One Bronx," to discuss the problems that face our borough. Together, we discussed the different ways we can tackle our issues, create new jobs and develop plans that will grow our economy. In the coming weeks, my office will begin to put forward a comprehensive economic plan, largely based on the ideas that were developed during this summit. Our plan will call for the expansion of the film industry, the creation of retail retention zones, and the development of a real hotel.

Think about it – we have the Bronx Zoo, great restaurants and the Yankees all in the Bronx. And yet, for too long a real hotel has been absent in our borough. Our business community and not-for-profit groups, which are in dire need of first-class conference space, could see this hotel become the centerpiece of a new revival. A new hotel would create hundreds of good-paying jobs offering health benefits, pension plans, and a chance for its workers to have a better life.

That is the kind of development we want to see in the Bronx...an opportunity that not only offers a much needed community benefit, but also creates meaningful jobs that offer Bronxites a career path out of poverty and into the middle class. We are all tired of visitors coming to the Bronx but spending their evenings in Westchester or New Jersey, taking with them the money that could have been spent in our restaurants and shops. Peter Ward, president of the New York Hotel Trades Council, and our administration will work together to seek developers who will make this concept a reality. Together, we will bring this much needed, and long overdue, project to our borough. We have a great deal to offer here in the Bronx, and hotel operators would be crazy to ignore us.

None of this will come easy, and I cannot do it alone. With that in mind, I would like to introduce everyone to Marlene Cintron, the new president of the BOEDC. Marlene will be my point person in our efforts to build and grow the Bronx economy. Marlene is an attorney whose years of service at companies like Merrill Lynch and Citibank, in state and federal government, and in the not-for-profit sector make her the perfect individual to lead the BOEDC into the new decade. Those of you who know Marlene know just how great she is, and if you don't know her you'll find out for yourself soon enough. I urge everyone to reach out to Marlene in the coming weeks and months to discuss your ideas with her and her staff, so that we can begin the hard work ahead of us. Marlene, good luck!

Though it is important, economic development will not be our only focus at Borough Hall. Last year my office was able to identify dozens of worthy organizations, and allocate more than \$21 million in funding to them. These funds will help to ensure that our schools stay strong, our parks remain beautiful, our senior citizen centers remain vital and our cultural organizations continue to provide the amazing programs they are known for.

Things are tough right now. The hit our economy has taken during the past two years has caused numerous budget cutbacks and job losses not only here, but across the entire nation. In times like these, our struggling not-for-profit organizations feel the budget pinch more than ever. I will fight, along with our borough's Council delegation, to make sure the Bronx gets its fair share of City dollars, regardless of the enormous budget cuts—to our senior services, to our schools, to our parks—that have been proposed by Mayor Bloomberg.

Additionally, we must make sure that all Bronxites, especially those that are new to this country, do not feel left out of the great conversation on the future of our borough. Look around this room...we know just how diverse our borough is, and we must continue to embrace that

diversity. Statistics indicate that 31 percent of the 1.4 million people who call the Bronx home are foreign-born. Last month, I announced the formation of a new African Advisory Council. This council will serve a dual purpose. It will inform my office on the unique issues of this growing population while also directing them to services and available benefits. Our nation is a nation of immigrants, and they only want what our own forbearers wanted for themselves: a chance for a better life. My hope is that this council will serve as a model for other growing populations, and will help to weave our growing immigrant communities into the tapestry of our city.

To do that, we must make sure we are counted. My office will push to ensure that all Bronxites, particularly our immigrants, are counted in the upcoming United States Census. The census results play a major role in deciding how much funding is made available to programs in our borough.

I cannot stress this enough...if we do not count, we will miss out. It's ten questions, and it takes ten minutes. We will protect our senior centers from budget cuts, and foster new initiatives to help them grow. This year, my office provided funding to 114 senior centers and programs in every corner of our borough. And we are doing even more for our elderly population. Just a few weeks ago I, along with the commissioner of the Department for the Aging, met with dozens of directors of Bronx senior citizen centers to discuss new programs, new funding opportunities, and to shape a vision for their collective future. My office is also preparing our first ever Senior Resource Guide, a great tool that will offer information about senior citizens centers, Social Security, veterans benefits, home care and many other topics that are important to our aging neighbors.

On housing, my office has been working with my colleague from Manhattan, Borough President Scott Stringer, to let tenants know their rights and protect them from scam artists that would seek to exploit the housing crisis for their own gain. We have created the first ever Public Housing Advisory Council, which meets once a month to work on solutions to a number of different issues facing our public housing developments. And my constituent services office helps dozens of Bronxites with their housing issues every day, making sure that Bronx families have a warm, safe place to sleep every night.

Just as our children cannot live in an unsafe environment, they cannot learn in an unsafe environment. My office has been leading the charge to make sure that our older school buildings are free of toxic chemicals, and has demanded that the Department of Education enact proper testing for PCB's in our classrooms. We have pumped millions of dollars into our Bronx schools to ensure that our children have the best learning experience possible—be it new computer equipment at P.S. 11 in Highbridge, the renovation of the library at the Grace Dodge Memorial High School, or the new planetarium at P.S. 24 in Riverdale.

And we are fighting to guarantee that when schools are closed in the Bronx, parents are given adequate notice and a real explanation as to why. The Department of Education, and Chancellor Klein, must know that we will not be ignored. When it comes to the success of our schools, we will be heard.

While the City will point to ever rising test scores on our State tests as evidence that the system is working, the results of the National Assessment of Education Progress indicate that achievement in our schools is stagnant at best. The SAT scores in many of our high schools are far too low. When the day ends, students do not have quality after school programs to attend. Art and music classes are no longer a mainstay of their daily curriculum.

Every month, I meet with a group of principals from our borough's public schools, and they have told me just how tough their jobs are, and how much more they need to make their schools a success. A majority of the students at our borough's two premiere public high schools, the Bronx High School of Science and the High School of American Studies at Lehman College, do not come from the Bronx. In fact, of the more than 13,500 eighth graders in Bronx public schools, only 334 were accepted into our City's specialized high schools. This number is far too low. We must work to change that...to ensure that our own students are prepared to take advantage of the wonderful opportunities available to them.

I am a strong supporter of charter schools, and I will push to raise the cap on the number of charter schools allowed in this state, so that more children can take advantage of these innovative education opportunities. However, the criticism has been that when a charter school takes up residence in a public school building, it does not participate in the life of that building, nor does it become a part of the community-at-large. The equipment is newer, the walls are freshly painted...the charter school becomes an oasis within the school building, and the parents, students and administrators at that public school feel left out. We need to bridge this divide. That is why I am challenging charter schools to use some of the funding they receive through philanthropy to make everyone's world a better place.

When a charter school comes to a public school building, it should use its funding to upgrade the physical plant of the entire building, not just its own section. Charter schools are an important resource, but they must do more to be vital to the entire community.

Our "One Bronx" will be a healthy Bronx. To impact the health of our borough, Bronxites must be healthy themselves. A recent study ranked the Bronx as the least healthy county in the entire state. This is unacceptable, and my office will change this dubious distinction. To that end we will host a Food Summit in May. We will work to bring healthier food options into our neighborhoods, through the expansion of supermarkets and farmers' markets in underserved communities and the addition of healthy food choices in our public schools. We recently saw the passage of legislation allowing individuals to use their EBT cards to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables at city farmers' markets. If we can accomplish this, surely we can do even more.

My office has partnered with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, through a \$1 million grant, to launch “Start Strong Bronx,” an effort that will rally teens, parents, caregivers, educators, and community leaders to build an environment that supports healthy relationships among teens and ensures that violence and abuse are never tolerated.

And I recorded a public service announcement, as part of the “Bronx Knows” campaign, urging individuals to make sure they know their status and get tested for HIV. The Bronx makes up 16 percent of the city’s population, yet 21 percent of all city residents living with HIV make their homes here. We also know that new diagnoses of HIV and AIDS are extremely high in the Latino and African-American communities, making it all the more urgent that Bronxites know their status.

During the two years this campaign has been active, more than 160,000 Bronxites have been tested for HIV and now know their status. My PSA, which is being broadcast in both English and Spanish in all city hospitals, is part of a greater effort to get all Bronxites tested, regardless of their age, gender or sexual orientation. For our own good, and the good of our families, we must know our status.

In the last year, we have seen a great deal of heartache in the Bronx at the hands of illegal guns. In September Aisha Santiago, from Mott Haven, was killed by a stray bullet right in front of her child. In October, Sadie Mitchell, a 92 year old grandmother and pillar of her community, was hit by a stray bullet that went through the window of her own home. She was killed while walking to her kitchen. And in November, 16-year-old Vada Vazquez was hit with a stray bullet when she got caught in the crossfire of a shootout. Vada survived, and for that we are grateful.

These examples do not include the dozens of victims that have lost their lives to random gun violence over the years, victims who Bronxites cannot and will not forget. We can no longer tolerate the terrible wave of gun violence that has descended on our borough. I have been to too many funerals. I have seen too many mothers and fathers...brothers and sisters...husbands and wives...families...torn apart by acts of senseless violence. It is time to stand up and say enough is enough.

Mayor Bloomberg and I do not agree on everything, but if there is any issue we stand side by side in agreement, it is the need for stronger gun control laws. That is why Congress needs to enact a national gun control law, so that we can begin to turn the tide against these random acts of violence. At some point all illegal guns were legal, so the protests of those who say that we are punishing law abiding citizens with our efforts must be ignored. We cannot allow outside interests to drive the debate, while our mothers, grandmothers and daughters are gunned down right before our eyes.

Changing the law is just one step. We have to do more. We have to teach our children that violence is not the answer to their problems. We have to teach our children that there are better, more productive ways to resolve their conflicts than to pick up a gun. In November, my office

hosted a “Day of Outrage,” with the purpose of showing the world that the Bronx has had enough of gun violence.

I grew up on Watson Avenue during the late 80’s and early 90’s. You could have accurately compared my neighborhood to the “O-K Corral.” Far too often, many of my peers turned to a gun because they foolishly believed that violence was the only way to settle a dispute. I saw some of my friends killed, while others would spend the rest of their lives in prison. It saddened and angered me then, and my anger has only grown over the years. I have seen the devastation gun violence causes, and, as a father of two young men, I will not allow our youth to head down this destructive path without pushing back.

In January, we co-hosted a gun buyback program with District Attorney Robert Johnson and the NYPD at four churches across the Bronx. We were able to take nearly 1,200 guns off of our streets. Using this program as a model, my office will look to take an additional 1,500 illegal firearms out of circulation in the next year. And my office will continue to identify different initiatives and funding streams to combat gun violence in our streets.

“One Bronx” is real, and we have already seen its benefits. We saw it when each of our neighborhoods came together to help the earthquake victims in Haiti. We saw it when two of our own residents, Douglas Murphy and Horia Cretan, risked their own health and well-being to save the lives of their fellow Bronxites, people they had never met. And we see it in the heroes of our police and fire departments, who put their lives on the line everyday to make our communities a little safer.

And we know that when Bronxites from all corners of the borough and from all walks of life come together to fight for what is right and what is just, as “One Bronx,” we can do anything. In December, we proved that. We stood together and sent a strong message throughout the city that we would no longer take a backseat when it came time to reap the rewards of our borough’s economic development, and we defeated the proposed redevelopment of the Kingsbridge Armory.

For too long, City Hall has embraced the mindset that what is good for developers is what is good for the five boroughs, with little regard for the real needs of the community. Planning should drive development, development should not determine our planning.

Our land—our most important and valuable natural resource—has been taken from us through zoning and the sale of air rights. Development plans have been created with little or no input from the communities that will host these new projects. Developers have been handed millions of dollars in taxpayer subsidies, and in return, we have received part-time jobs without benefits that offer few, if any, chances for advancement.

Listen to me carefully. For those of you who would distort my position by saying that I want to stop jobs from coming to the Bronx...you are wrong. Nothing could be further from the truth. As

I have said, the idea that any job is better than no job should no longer apply specifically when developers take millions of dollars in taxpayer funding.

Let me repeat that. The idea that any job is better than no job should no longer apply *specifically* when developers take millions of dollars in taxpayer funding.

When New Yorkers are already struggling to pay their rents, when they must worry about feeding and clothing their children, when our poverty rates are the highest in the nation, we cannot accept that the minimum wage is the best salary a developer can offer while they take so heavily from the taxpayers' wallets. If you want charity, you must be charitable. If you want a public benefit, your project must benefit the public.

Do not misunderstand me. I welcome development, and I am ready, willing and able to work with everyone that wants to do business within our borough. But we must raise the standard of that development. We must stand up and demand that major projects that receive heavy taxpayer benefits offer more than poverty level jobs. It is time to do better.

The fight at the Kingsbridge Armory was not about preventing development, nor was it about focusing on the parochial concerns of a small corner of the city. What we stood for at the Kingsbridge Armory was the right of all city residents to earn an honest living when developers take large taxpayer subsidies to make their projects work. Our call has been heard throughout the City, and I will lead the fight for better wages not just for Bronxites, but for all New Yorkers.

That is why I am proud that two of my Bronx colleagues in government, City Council Members Oliver Koppell and the dean of our borough delegation, Annabel Palma, have partnered with me to introduce a bill that would require builders who receive government funding for their projects to pay a living wage to the future employees of that development. In my conversations with leaders from across the city I have found that this is a priority not just here in the Bronx, but in all five boroughs. This bill has already received significant support, and I am hopeful that we will be able to see it become law this year.

And I do not want to see the Kingsbridge Armory remain empty. That is why today I am announcing the creation of a new task force, co-chaired by myself and Councilman Fernando Cabrera, that will examine the armory and discuss ideas for its future use, such as manufacturing, recreation, and other innovative uses. This task force, whose members will be announced in the coming days, will help shape a new RFP for this majestic building from the ground up. The community's voice will be heard.

My administration has begun to lay out an aggressive agenda to create new jobs that offer Bronxites not just a chance to work, but a chance to provide. We are pushing for new jobs in the growing green economy, and we will make sure that Bronx residents are ready to take advantage of those opportunities. We are working together to make sure our schools are properly serving our students. And we are making every possible effort to ensure that our streets are safer.

The borough presidency provides a crucial resource for all city residents—to help them find work, to assist them in their housing crisis, to coordinate with neighborhoods to put forward a plan to make their communities a better place. Our community boards, my partners in government, are typically the first to know about new problems and issues effecting their neighborhoods. Community boards encourage civic participation and offer everyday New Yorkers a voice in the decision making process, and are critical to the life of our five boroughs.

Together, we represent the front line of democratic government for many, and we are typically more accessible than the massive bureaucracy at City Hall. Any effort to change that structure would be foolish, and would incur the wrath of all New Yorkers. In fact, the new reform charter revision commission must hear the voices of Bronxites and hold a hearing right here in our borough.

We have a great deal of work to do, and it will not be easy. But I have faith in the people of the Bronx. And we as elected officials must make sure that the people have faith in us, and that we respect and honor the trust that our constituents have place in them.

I know that together, as “One Bronx,” we have the knowledge, the skills, and the determination to tackle the issues the Bronx faces head on.

I know that, as “One Bronx,” we have the will to stand up and fight for our neighborhoods, to ensure that we no longer receive the short end of the stick when it comes to economic development, education, and the critical funding our communities need to thrive.

I know that, as “One Bronx,” we can make our already wonderful borough even greater. The Bronx is home—our home—and only by working together can we realize the bright future of our borough.

In 1931, the poet Ogden Nash published in the *New Yorker* perhaps the shortest, and most unfortunate, poem ever written.

*“The Bronx? No Thonx!”*

In 1964, a professor at Bronx Community College wrote to Nash to call him out on his mistake. Having seen the error of his ways, Nash replied:

*I wrote those lines, “The Bronx? No thonx”*

*I shudder to confess them.*

*Now I’m an older, wiser man*

*I cry, “The Bronx? God bless them!”*

We have come a long way—not only from the time of Jonas Bronck but from the days of Fort Apache and from the days when the Bronx was burning. There are wonderful things happening

in our borough, and slowly but surely we are changing the minds of those who would only focus on the negative - just like Nash's mind was changed 46 years ago.

Together, as "One Bronx," we will change even more minds—and maybe even turn a few heads—as we usher in a new era of success to our hometown.

Let's get to work.

God bless you, God bless the Bronx, and God bless America!