

STATE OF THE BOROUGH ADDRESS
BRONX BOROUGH PRESIDENT RUBEN DIAZ JR.
FEBRUARY 18, 2016

Welcome to the “State of the Borough,” and welcome to Cardinal Hayes High School.

We have seen tremendous change in our Borough since this school opened in 1941. Through both good and challenging times, our Borough has been home to venerable institutions like Hayes. This school has molded thousands of young men, like Martin Scorcese, Regis Philbin, my own son Ruben—this school’s 2010 valedictorian—and so many others, into productive, upstanding members of society.

2016 is the 75th anniversary of Cardinal Hayes High School, and we congratulate our hosts on that milestone today.

Over the last seven years, we have collaborated with our neighbors in every corner of this great borough to revitalize our communities, keep people in their homes, welcome new visitors and residents, strengthen our economy and put people to work.

There has been incredible, transformative progress here since 2009. Simply put, there is a great deal to celebrate.

We have created more than 23,000 new units of housing and over 68 million square feet of total development.

Through the Bronx Overall Economic Development Corporation we’ve put millions in new funding into business projects all over the borough. New eateries are opening everywhere. We’re helping companies expand their operations. We’re becoming the city’s top destination for world class beer and spirits, and we remain the world’s leader in wholesale food production.

And this new growth means new jobs. Since 2009 unemployment has been cut nearly in half, down to 6.9 percent. The Federal Reserve has found that job opportunities here are growing at a faster pace than the city as a whole. Our workforce participation rate has never been higher.

Tech has come to The Bronx. In September, I was proud to cut the ribbon at the headquarters of software testing firm Doran Jones. Their Urban Development Center, a partnership with Per Scholas, has already “insourced” 150 jobs that typically go overseas. With an influx of state funding, their job creation efforts will expand.

In June, with StartUpBox and my good friends Majora Carter and Assembly Member Michael Blake; along with Google, Cablevision, Verizon and others, we convened the first ever “Bronx Tech Summit.” This year, we will author a report to guide the expansion of this industry.

In partnership with Code/Interactive we launched the Code/Bronx initiative in December, with a goal to start a computer science program at every school. Through the BOEDC and its

partnership with State Senator Jeff Klein, we provided funding to Scenyc, an upstart technology and web services provider for small businesses.

There is no reason why we cannot be the next Silicon Valley.

The entertainment industry, like tech, is growing here. The \$35 million Silvercup Studios expansion will create jobs in the South Bronx. Crews from *Boardwalk Empire*, *Gotham*, *Daredevil* and the soon to be released *The Get Down* are using our borough as the backdrop for their shows. When it opens in June, Silvercup will cement our place in the world of film and television production, as will the future York Studios in Soundview.

It's not just about new development, new jobs and new housing. It's about a new mindset and a new image. We are changing how people feel and think about this borough. We are elevating expectations in all facets of Bronx life.

We must lead by example. We will love our neighbors. We will not tolerate acts against individuals based on characteristics like religion or sexual orientation. I have stood up for what is right when these attacks have taken place, and I will continue to do so. I challenge Bronxites and all New Yorkers to stand united against intolerance and hate.

Despite reported increases in other parts of the city, violent crime remains at a historic low in The Bronx. Shooting incidents and shooting victims fell here. For the third straight year, our borough saw fewer than 100 homicides.

A single life lost is still too many. We must stand with President Obama in his call for common sense reforms. We must continue to pressure the NRA and their enablers in Congress to get out of the way of sensible gun legislation.

We'll continue our efforts locally, as well. The commendable drop in crime our borough has seen over the past two decades is the result of both a dedicated police department and the hard work of elected officials, clergy leaders, community organizers and the general public. This year we'll expand our "Peace in our Streets" initiative, advance our statewide gun offender registry bill and bolster our efforts to keep crime low. In 2015 the NYPD took 631 guns off our streets. But we need to do more.

With that said, we have a new partner in that fight, ladies and gentlemen. There is a new sheriff in town at the Hall of Justice. This year we elected the first African-American woman in the history of this state to serve as district attorney. Let's give a strong round of applause to District Attorney Darcel Clark.

Public safety and public health go hand in hand. While we had an extraordinary 2015, it was not without tragedy. A Legionnaires' disease outbreak left 130 Bronxites sick, and caused 13 deaths. I know I speak for everyone when I offer our thoughts and prayers to the families and friends of those we lost so tragically.

The city failed us during this outbreak. So I demanded action. This led to an increased response from Governor Cuomo and all levels of government. And, through the leadership of Council Member Vanessa Gibson, the City Council was able to quickly pass legislation that will lower the probability of future outbreaks.

I will always advocate for the attention and resources we deserve. But let's be honest—part of the reason this outbreak hit us so hard because of the existing public health disparities in our Borough.

For six consecutive years, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation named us the least healthy county in New York State—62 of 62. That was somber news. But we acted. And we are seeing real progress.

We're funding improved parks, ensuring access to healthier foods in every community, getting people exercising and more. Today, we're improving health outcomes in The Bronx.

We are requiring developers to build green. Businesses are being recognized for their healthy initiatives. Freshdirect has been honored by the Obama administration for their efforts to clean their delivery fleet. More than 100 bodegas received awards for participating in the "Shop Healthy" initiative, which incentivizes small businesses to provide nutritious food options.

We are pursuing several pieces of legislation in City Hall. We will create an expanded "health impact statement" for city projects, while also strengthening our efforts to develop a letter grading system for nail salons and other cosmetology establishments.

This year we saw real progress in increasing the rates of insured Bronxites. This allows for more preventative screenings and proper treatment while providing economic protection against unforeseen medical costs or emergencies.

These efforts, combined with our #NOT62 social media campaign, are making The Bronx a healthier place. In October, the same organization that rated us last in the state awarded us their prestigious 'Culture of Health' Prize in recognition of our significant efforts. But we can and must do more.

We will continue to make health a priority by creating and improving green spaces. Since 2009, I've funded more than \$28 million in park projects. Our funding has helped renovate Roberto Clemente State Park, and helped construct the long-awaited amphitheater in Soundview Park. We saw the opening of the Randall's Island connector, as well as the reopening of the High Bridge. And a new pedestrian bridge is coming to Van Cortlandt Park, thanks to Council Member Andrew Cohen. We are developing unprecedented access to green space in every Bronx neighborhood.

We must generate new public space. After years of delays, we partnered with the Department of Environmental Protection to reopen the Jerome Park Reservoir to the public. November's pilot saw real enthusiasm, and we should build on that momentum. We will develop a plan that allows for permanent access to the reservoir.

Our ongoing revitalization requires us to not only develop new projects and infrastructure improvements. We must also reimagine our existing resources. We must reinvigorate them not just for Bronxites, but the entire city and region.

Just a few blocks south, on 149th Street and the Grand Concourse, the former General Post Office has a new owner in Youngwoo & Associates. It is a new day for this landmark building. I am proud to announce that when this building reopens next year, reimagined as Bronx Post Place, it will feature a rooftop restaurant and lounge, a food and retail market, and top-tier office space for small businesses.

Land is at a premium in this city. We must consider the creative repurposing of existing properties. And, perhaps, we must generate new real estate in areas where none exists.

Last year, I announced a study of the potential of building a platform at three railyard sites. One of those locations, the Concourse Yards adjacent to Lehman College, has proven to offer the most potential for transformative development. My report estimated that a platform could bring with it the opportunity for nearly two million square feet of development. This would include affordable housing, homeownership, retail, the expansion of Lehman College and more.

New infrastructure improvements are helping our borough reach new levels of success. In City Island, we are closer to the completion of the new bridge, thanks to the Department of Transportation. We've made improvements to the Grand Concourse, and we will bring a dedicated bike lane to this iconic roadway.

In September, the MTA approved the funding of our four new Metro North stations. The economic benefits of new transit projects are undeniable, and we look forward to full approval by the State Legislature.

I would like to thank Governor Andrew Cuomo for his strong support and commitment to funding its completion. These four Metro North stations will reshape the entire region. No project is more important to our continued progress.

This growth brings new development and new jobs, and helps to work against income inequality. In that battle, my office is engaged on multiple fronts. We are fighting to raise our state's minimum wage to \$15 an hour. The Bronx was the birthplace of this City's "living wage" movement, so we know just how important this campaign for economic justice and financial fairness is.

Moreover, with Spring Bank, we will help the underserved and immigrant communities open bank accounts using IDNYC. We are giving people the tools to develop financial freedom.

We will also fight any backdoor scheme to take money from the financially insecure. The people of this city cannot afford to pay extra for plastic shopping bags, nor can they afford a toll on free bridges. Regressive taxes must be abandoned.

Education paves the way for success for Bronxites, and we must help our students to achieve more. Through my capital budget, I was able to provide more than \$10 million to 67 school projects in 2015. This includes a new auditorium at Alfred E. Smith High School, a new greenhouse at P.S. 199X in Highbridge, and technology upgrades in every neighborhood. I also allocated \$1 million towards the renovation of the playground shared by P.S. 55, a traditional public school, and Success Academy 2, a public charter school.

I support charter schools. And I support public schools as well. But what I support more than anything are our children. P.S. 55 and the Success Academy are showing the entire city what it means to create a campus that is welcoming and provides our students with the best education possible.

Remember, the education of our students is not about the grown-ups, or anyone's particular ideology. It is about the children. All students must be treated equitably by the Department of Education, whether they are in a traditional public school or a public charter school.

The Department of Education should do more to provide greater opportunities for students of all ages. They should consider expanding universal pre-K by bringing classes to underutilized NYCHA community centers. They should also provide greater access to gifted and talented classes.

To this end, my office took the lead and hosted forums so that parents could educate other parents about testing for Gifted and Talented programs. Together, we raised awareness and increased the number of students who took tests for these programs in The Bronx this year. We did not wait for the City to act.

However, the city must do more to ensure these students have local access to gifted classes. In 2015, just 87 pre-K students in District 7, the South Bronx, were tested. Since only six of those students qualified, the Department of Education didn't bother finding them a class.

I was a student in a gifted class in District 7 myself. Under the current system, I would have been denied the opportunity I deserved. That is unacceptable. I join the City Council's Black, Latino and Asian Caucus in their call to test every child who attends a public pre-K. If more students are tested more students will qualify, and more students will be given the same opportunity I was.

Our needs on education extend to the state. The mayor and the governor are correct to call for an extension of mayoral control, and the legislature needs to pass that bill. Mayoral control means greater accountability around the public education system, and that accountability should be available to this mayor and all future mayors, whoever they might be.

We also need to do more to keep our college students from accumulating unnecessary debt. If you earned a public high school diploma, shouldn't you be prepared for college? More than 78 percent of CUNY community college students who graduated from public high school took remedial courses last school year. What does it mean when high school graduates are forced to pay for their own remedial classes at CUNY?

A public education should come with a warranty. Students should not be forced to pay to catch-up in college after their high school failed them. Today, I propose that the Department of Education absorb the cost of remedial classes at CUNY for public high school graduates. We cannot give diplomas to unprepared students and pass along the costs to them. The City should take responsibility for college readiness.

On numerous issues—jobs, safety, infrastructure, education and more—we are enacting a smart agenda. We are planning with purpose. But there are certainly areas where we all need to do so much more. Two closely intertwined issues, more than any other, have dominated the conversation in our city: the lack of affordable housing and our City's inability to effectively deal with homelessness.

When it comes to keeping people in their homes, no one is working harder than we are. Whether we are helping tenants turn the heat back on, or helping a family facing eviction seek relief in court, my office functions as a last line of defense for thousands, many of whom have nowhere else to turn.

Every single day, my constituent services staff stands on the front lines in the fight against displacement. My office has begun a partnership with Phipps Neighborhood Services to provide financial counseling and credit repair services to Bronxites who need them. Through my senior affairs unit, we are enrolling more and more individuals in the NYC Rent Freeze Program, keeping our elders in their homes at a more affordable rate.

We need more tools to assist in our efforts. The City Council must hold a hearing on Intro 214, which would provide free legal services to tenants in housing court. This is a common-sense protection we can offer our most vulnerable tenants, and a hearing is the first step toward passing this new law.

We are leading the way on development, as well. This year alone we put \$11.2 million of my capital budget into low and moderate income housing developments, supporting the creation of over 2,300 units of housing.

On Westchester Avenue, we partnered with the Acacia Network to build low income housing specifically for formerly homeless families. We are providing housing for elderly musicians at the Bronx Music Heritage Center in Melrose. In Mott Haven, we teamed up with the West Side Federation for Senior and Supportive Housing to preserve low-income housing for seniors at Borinquen Court.

At La Central in The Hub, we funded low-income homes for veterans with mental illness and for senior citizens living with HIV and AIDS. In Soundview, we are funding home ownership opportunities. In Bedford Park, we joined Cyndi Lauper to cut the ribbon at True Colors, a safe space for homeless LGBT youth. With SAGE and HELP USA, we're funding housing for LGBT seniors.

In December, I joined the national AFL-CIO and clergy leaders to announce a plan to use union pension funds to develop affordable housing on underutilized land owned by houses of worship. This partnership will help the entire city develop much needed affordable housing and create union jobs.

We are ensuring that Bronxites can stay in The Bronx and that The Bronx is where people want to live, work and raise a family.

We will also preserve our existing affordable housing and make it more energy efficient. Last year I announced a plan to create jobs, reduce energy costs and fight displacement through the creation of my “Green Development Fund.”

This year, we identified a property owner who is willing to take these steps in realizing a greener Bronx while preserving affordable units. Chestnut Holdings, which manages more than 4,000 apartments in our borough, is identifying needed upgrades through an energy audit of their buildings. We will set an example for the preservation of environmentally-friendly affordable housing across the city.

All of this, ladies and gentlemen, helps to create homes for everyone, including the least fortunate—the homeless.

Make no mistake, we are in the midst of a homeless crisis in New York City. Every night, nearly 60,000 people stay in a shelter. Fifty eight percent are African-Americans, and 31 percent are Latino. One-third of shelter residents have a job. Nearly 40 percent are children. That is the face of homelessness.

Some of what we need to do should come as no surprise. We need to build appropriate housing, and provide adequate services. Can you imagine how deplorable the conditions have to be in the shelters that so many homeless would choose instead to brave the elements and unpredictability of the streets?

Fixing the shelter system is a much deeper challenge than just fixing building code violations. In addition to holding the right people accountable for these conditions, the City should provide the resources to augment services at shelter sites, such as mental health and job counseling. We must track the results of these programs to replicate the models of successful service providers, and to finally end homelessness one individual at a time.

I have funded thousands of units of supportive and low income housing. Our borough is home to the citywide intake center, and we host over 120 homeless facilities within our borders. We have demonstrated that we are our brother and sister’s keeper.

Yet, when a proposal to build supportive housing comes before our community we cast aspersions on the future residents and fight tooth and nail to prevent it. All of New York City needs to do its part to solve the homelessness epidemic. That’s why today I am recommending that the city mandate apartments in new developments for working people currently living in the

shelter system, such as LINC recipients. This is a call to conscience. NIMBYism must give way to compassion.

There are creative ways to develop housing of all types to combat displacement and homelessness. We have proven we can do that.

We adopted no less than 14 rezonings here since 2009, using the traditional “neighborhood by neighborhood” approach. Why fix what is not broken? We cannot pass the administration’s zoning text amendments.

How can we totally change the look and feel of this entire city on such short notice? How can we dramatically alter something so profound as how our city is built with a broad stroke? How can we eliminate parking requirements? How can we plan for increased density without considering the impact it will have on schools and transportation hubs? These amendments as they stand are not the way to accomplish affordable housing for all New Yorkers.

Look at all we have accomplished by sticking to our principles. This has been an incredible year. And 2016 promises to be even greater.

We will continue to partner with developers, community organizations, elected officials and others to build even more low and moderate income housing units, while also planning for units to preserve our professional class.

We will make healthy food options more easily available by urging the Department of Agriculture to change its rules to allow the use of EBT benefits to purchase from online vendors. We will partner with Congress to promote this initiative. Affordable nutrition should not be a victim of antiquated regulations.

We will fight for our brothers and sisters in Puerto Rico. The Republican leadership in Congress can no longer put hedge funds ahead of our people. These are American citizens. They deserve our support.

We will continue to strengthen our cultural institutions. We funded a renovation of Pregones Theater, and the reconstruction of the iconic dome at the New York Botanical Garden. The long-awaited Bronx Children’s Museum has nearly completed its design phase, and will break ground later this year. We’ll build a new Van Cortlandt branch library, and do more to get books into the hands of all Bronxites.

We will continue to attract visitors from all corners of the earth. This year The Bronx Tourism Council released their first-ever visitors guide and welcomed epicureans from all over the region to the largest ever “Savor the Bronx” restaurant week. Tourism is at an all-time high, and people from all over the world are discovering our borough. Even President Barack Obama stopped by.

We can attract even more visitors if we commit to serious investment in one long-neglected landmark. In 2015, Orchard Beach saw nearly 1.5 million visitors. There are a lot of great reasons to visit the “Bronx Riviera.” Not only is there swimming and sunbathing, we have

classic car shows, our annual “Salsafest” concert series, fireworks, and, perhaps the greatest test of athletic ability and mental acuity known to man, empanada eating contests.

We need first-rate concessions, performance spaces and the ability to host top-notch events. We need to create jobs and rebuild Orchard Beach’s historic pavilion as the economic engine it once was and could be again. I am committing today to a \$10 million down payment from my own capital budget, and I am proud to say my colleagues in the legislature are joining me in this important campaign. This proposal is ambitious. But when have we ever lacked ambition?

We continue to encourage the growth of our major economic engines. This administration must finalize a plan for the redevelopment of the Hunts Point markets. These markets employ thousands of people directly, and have an economic impact that can be felt across the east coast. City, state, and federal dollars have been put aside for this plan, and we cannot afford to wait any longer.

Supporting our small businesses is smart policy. We will study our commercial corridors, like we did in Kingsbridge, to identify the resources they need. And we will provide them funding when possible, to make sure our economy grows at every level.

Keeping every neighborhood in our borough clean will make us safer and more prosperous. We are helping businesses remove graffiti, and we encourage everyone to take advantage of the “Forever Graffiti Free” program. This year we will launch the “Bronx Youth Corps,” which will engage middle and high school students in cleanup and beautification efforts in our neighborhoods, and empower them with the skills to become leaders.

And we partnered with the DOT to make our highways cleaner, and have increased participation in the “Adopt-a-Highway program. I urge the businesses here today to commit to adopting a highway of their own.

We will continue to put people to work. Since Governor Cuomo announced the Bronx Strike Force against unemployment in 2014 we have placed more than 7,500 Bronx residents into jobs. We can push that number to over 10,000.

And we will fight to make sure that the jobs we create provide individuals a decent, honest living.

More than anything, we will progress. We will move forward.

As our borough’s recent visitor, President Obama, so eloquently stated, “Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we've been waiting for.”

We are not sitting idly by and watching our borough change. Rather, we are actively guiding the progress of The Bronx, and doing everything we can to ensure that the future is for everyone—from the long-term resident who helped rebuild after the destruction of decades ago, to the new immigrant or college graduate looking to live the middle-class dream and everyone in between. We are making the right choices.

Years ago, crime was so rampant here that foreign visitors were warned to stay away. Now we are safer than ever before, and we are leading the way in tourism. We urged people all over the world to give us a second look, and that is happening.

We wanted the same amenities and enhancements as other communities, and we are getting them. There was a time when developers turned away from us. That is changing.

Last year, The Bronx saw over \$2 billion in development, more than any other year in our history. We labored for serious investment in our borough from both the public and private sectors, and we are seeing it.

One hundred thousand more Bronxites are employed today than when I was first elected. That is the definition of progress. For too long, we led the way in unemployment. Today, we are leading the way in job creation.

The Bronx is blossoming. All of this is happening because of the years of advocacy and dedication of all of you: the elected officials, community activists, community boards, friends, family and neighbors that make up the fabric of the Bronx that 1.4 million New Yorkers so proudly call our home.

Together, we have done the work to make The Bronx a better place.

And what is good for The Bronx is good for the city.

Thank you!