

STATE OF THE BOROUGH ADDRESS
BRONX BOROUGH PRESIDENT RUBEN DIAZ JR.
FEBRUARY 23, 2017

Nearly 77 years ago my predecessor, James Lyons, planted a Bronx flag just a few blocks from here and declared Marble Hill part of the borough it is connected to, The Bronx. The county line that separates Manhattan from The Bronx runs through the middle of this room. Today, we bridge that divide.

While Gale Brewer might feel differently, I agree with Borough President Lyons and so many others that have dedicated themselves to the reunification of this neighborhood. So, welcome to The Bronx!

For nearly eight years, my office and our partners have developed and executed policies of equity and smart services, making The Bronx an even better place for all its residents. Last year, I stood before you and announced several initiatives that have come to fruition.

We said we would provide lawyers for tenants in court. We did.

We said we'd raise the minimum wage to \$15 an hour. We did.

We said we'd bring EBT usage online. We did.

We said we'd stop the regressive bag tax. We did.

We said we would obtain the funding to rebuild Orchard Beach. We did.

We've created jobs, increased wages, improved the health and well-being of our residents and provided our schools with much-needed capital funding.

And of course, none of this would have been possible without the collaboration of all the elected officials who are here today.

Investing in our youth is essential for building a bright future, and we take this responsibility seriously. This year, my office provided millions in capital funding to schools at every grade level, from classroom upgrades at our elementary schools to a new technology center at my alma mater, Lehman College. We've funded the renovation of the football field, technology upgrades and a brand new library right here on this campus.

We created new service opportunities for our kids through the Bronx Youth Corps, a leadership training and volunteer program we've partnered on with DreamYard, M.S. 390 and WHEDco. We are encouraging our youth to find the best in themselves and to become leaders who effect positive changes in their communities. Students in the program have already beautified Railroad Park in Melrose, and are planning additional impactful service.

And we have also expanded employment opportunities. Companies of all sizes have relocated here. We are now home to a growing and diverse group of industry leaders including grocery delivery, film and television production, stout beer and hot sauce.

Nearly 100,000 more Bronx residents have jobs today than did in May 2009. Since then, unemployment is down by more than half, and labor force participation has increased by 13 percent.

Billions of dollars in new public and private investment has made its way to The Bronx. Arthur Avenue was recognized as one of the greatest streets in our nation by the American Planning Association, and Kingsbridge was named the hottest neighborhood in the city by StreetEasy.com. The New York Times declared the South Bronx one of its top places to visit in the world. Twenty years ago, such accolades were unfathomable.

We are an international success story, in no small part thanks to public/private partnerships that have brought us critical new funding. For example, the New York State Regional Economic Development Council has awarded over \$58 million to our borough across 80 projects over the last six years.

New housing has also helped to support our economic growth. Since 2009, we have leveraged \$1.6 billion towards the creation of over 6,100 affordable units across 68 projects, mostly for low-income families.

Significant infrastructure funding buttresses our progress. The planning stage for the Metro-North expansion has begun. Ferry service is finally coming to Soundview, and we're planning for the future of the Sheridan Expressway. Governor Cuomo, Mayor de Blasio and the New York State Assembly, led by Speaker Carl Heastie, have partnered with my office to allocate \$50 million in capital funds for the renovation of the historic Orchard Beach pavilion. This is a tremendous first step towards the complete redevelopment and revitalization the "Bronx Riviera" deserves.

And, finally, the Kingsbridge Armory is moving forward. In January, Governor Cuomo announced an additional \$108 million in state financing for the Kingsbridge National Ice Center. This project now has the funding it needs, thanks to the governor's continued commitment to our borough. Let's get it done!

We're bringing a new, state-of-the-art YMCA to Edenwald with Speaker Heastie, and a baseball academy to Roberto Clemente State Park with Harlem RBI and Major League Baseball. We're bridging the digital divide thanks to new wi-fi kiosks, rolling out in neighborhoods all over The Bronx. Through our newly-created anti-poverty task force we are tackling socio-economic disadvantage head on, thanks to the efforts of Assembly Member Marcos Crespo and the entire Bronx delegation.

Our streets are safer, our businesses are thriving and our new housing stock is the envy of the nation.

We have seen considerable improvement. But life is certainly not perfect in our borough and our city.

Homelessness is at a record high, and our public housing is in crisis. Our criminal justice system needs a major overhaul and mental health care in this city is failing our citizens. Our children sit in overcrowded classrooms and large communities of this city are grossly underrepresented in our best high schools and most Advanced Placement classes.

Services and amenities abundant in other boroughs are lacking here and, despite having world-class hospitals, our borough's health indicators have been slow to improve.

We can do even better for our borough. In so many areas, however, we are on the right track.

Our efforts on housing have yielded considerable progress. Smart planning requires new affordable housing units and preserving our existing housing stock. This year alone my office allocated millions in capital funds for housing to create over 850 new units. With HUD, we co-hosted a forum for hundreds of constituents, teaching them how to find and apply for affordable housing. We've been making sure that Bronxites benefit from new housing opportunities in our borough.

This year, we will continue to advocate for and inform the conversation around the future of the Jerome Avenue corridor. The rezoning the city has proposed must minimize displacement of the businesses and residents of the neighborhood. We will not allow anyone to dramatically change the entire West Bronx without real assurances that these plans will work for the existing population.

We cannot create new opportunities for development without providing true affordability, as well as job training and certification programs for auto-workers there. We need to also provide strong protections for tenants, such as, landlord certificates of no harassment.

Our homeless population is at an all-time high, yet the city has not been able to stem the tide of increasing homelessness. More than 60,000 individuals are homeless. That includes more than 24,000 children. Bureaucratic red tape keeps families out of available homes for months, and the shelter siting process has become mired in politics.

When the city does find homes for those who need them, they are not sufficiently regulated for safety. Where are the ambitious initiatives to stop the problem in its tracks right now? We are moving in the wrong direction.

Permanent supportive housing is the key to preventing recurring homelessness. My office has put considerable funding into creating permanent supportive housing, leveraging my capital budget to bring over \$400 million in such development to our borough, building nearly 1,400 units.

With Acacia, we've built 51 units of supportive housing on Westchester Avenue. La Central in The Hub will include 160 units for individuals living with HIV/AIDS. And True Colors in Bedford Park will host 31 units for LGBT youth. We are doing our share for the formerly homeless.

We must continue to build more low-income housing, and provide families and individuals with the resources they need to prevent homelessness. That's why I support Queens Assembly Member Andrew Hevesi's Home Stability Support plan, which would give rent subsidies to those in danger of losing their homes. Isn't it cheaper to help someone with their rent, to provide them with the stability of their home, rather than put them up in a fancy Times Square hotel for \$600 a night? Isn't that just common sense?

Furthermore, the city must initiate an aggressive reform in our broken shelter system to provide humane, clean and safe spaces for our most vulnerable residents during their difficult times. We cannot accept another catastrophe like the one we saw this December when a faulty radiator killed two small children in their City-provided housing.

Council Member Rafael Salamanca and I have partnered on new legislation designed to prevent the City from leasing space to house the homeless in buildings that have serious outstanding violations or stop-work orders. Basic human dignity requires that our homeless have appropriate housing. The wallets of slumlords should not get fat on taxpayer dollars.

The city must also do more for those who call the New York City Housing Authority their home. NYCHA residents deserve the same dignity and respect that any of us would demand: cleanliness, safety and comfort.

More than two years ago, I met with residents of the Patterson Houses at their community center. I heard their concerns, and I allocated \$200,000 for renovations. We discussed the problems regarding safety and maintenance at the development. At the time, the residents reported to me that the development did not have a boiler, and that they were forced to use unreliable temporary boilers to heat their buildings in the winter. More than two years later, those temporary boilers are still in use. Nothing has changed.

NYCHA needs to be more responsive to tenant needs. We must consider new ideas. How can the city do a better job at making timely repairs? How can we address the disproportionately high crime rates in public housing? How can we make NYCHA a better place to live?

To address these issues, my NYCHA Task Force has met with tenant leaders from all over the borough, and is developing a strategy plan for the future of public safety in public housing. We have already learned from tenant leaders at the task force's first hearing that security systems are not working and that residents are not getting the services they need. Our multi-pronged plan, to be announced in the coming months, will include recommendations on everything from technology to the creation of innovative social services in NYCHA community centers.

The construction of new housing units, the restoration of existing units and a focus on improved public housing each helps to keep The Bronx affordable, reduces homelessness and combats displacement. But very low-income housing is not the only answer. We need to provide opportunities for our middle class and young professionals, as well.

What bar are we setting when we tell our city's youth to go out, get a good education, graduate and get a professional job when we do not have appropriate housing for them to return too? We must build more mixed-income housing. We have to encourage economic diversity in our communities, and keep our growing class of young professionals, and their employment and income status in The Bronx.

One South Bronx site offers tremendous opportunity for such housing. In Port Morris, we've joined with the Empire State Development Corporation to examine the building of a platform over a 13-acre area at the Harlem River Yards. We could create thousands of housing units and new amenities to complement them. We could use this space to bring a tech incubator or medical school to our borough, while also creating union jobs, new waterfront access, parkland and recreation facilities.

The health of our borough is slowly improving. We have seen some success in building a healthier borough through partnerships with the public and private sector.

In many cases, we're bringing health services right to your doorsteps. The St. Barnabas Wellness Care and Affordable Housing project will combine more than 300 affordable homes with new health amenities, such as on-site pediatric and women's health centers, indoor and outdoor fitness areas, and even a yoga studio. This collaboration will put healthcare and fitness options in people's homes, and represents a new paradigm for the combination of life and wellness.

We've also teamed up with non-profits at the Bronx River Community Center to bring in needed services, such as a dental and health clinic, on a monthly basis. Our participation and engagement has helped increased attendance at the community center by 100 percent.

We are partnering with the Albert Einstein College of Medicine and the Jacobi Medical Center to bring a peer-to-peer HIV/AIDS education and job training program to the Taft High School campus. This program, called "HIV and Me," has already been recognized as a "Bright Idea" by the prestigious Harvard Innovations in American Government Awards, and could be a model for the entire city.

Last month, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) announced the selection of New York State to participate in a nationwide pilot program to allow Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) participants to purchase their groceries online. With Congressman Sean Patrick Maloney and our partners in the New York State Congressional delegation, we were able to convince the USDA to allow New York to set the example for the entire nation.

I first proposed this new initiative in my state of the borough address last year. We made it happen. Using SNAP benefits online, just like you would a credit or debit card, will expand access to healthier groceries and is a national game changer.

Some predicted changes at the national level under the new president are far less favorable for The Bronx. An estimated three hundred thousand Bronxites are at risk of losing coverage with the repeal of the Affordable Care Act. At the local level, we need to continue making changes that affect our well-being, and the city must provide us with the resources we deserve.

We need a more equitable transportation system. I stand with the Community Service Society, the Riders Alliance, my fellow borough presidents and advocates in calling on the city to embrace the “fair fares” campaign, and provide half-price transit fares to the working poor. Metrocard rates should not act like a regressive tax on the poor. For a relatively small investment, considering the size of the overall city budget, we can make the lives of hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers significantly better and give our neediest commuters a helping hand out of poverty.

Additionally, my colleague on Staten Island, James Oddo, and I have begun a campaign to expand Citi Bike services to all five boroughs and to infuse the bike-sharing program with taxpayer funding. The administration has stated publicly that Citi Bike must be expanded to The Bronx, and yet we still lack this service. Public funding would lead to increased private capital for the system, and would finally make the “citi” in Citi Bike mean something.

It is also time for the city and state, as well as public and private organizations, to begin the planning stages for the ambitious Triboro Line subway expansion that has been proposed by the Regional Plan Association. A new subway line would connect Brooklyn, Queens and The Bronx into the existing transit system.

No matter how much housing and infrastructure we build here, our borough will not achieve its full potential until our public school system provides our children with the education they require to succeed. However, we have had significant achievements when it comes to education in The Bronx.

This year, we initiated CodeBronx with our partner Code/Interactive. Our goal is to introduce coding to every school so that students can master this important and highly marketable skill for the modern economy.

We are engaging parents in their school communities through the Bronx Fathers Taking Action initiative.

The High School for American Studies at Lehman College was named the best public high school in New York, and one of the best in the nation.

The Bronx Center for Science and Mathematics on Fulton Avenue is one of the highest ranked schools in the city. Students there have received the prestigious Posse Scholarship, and 98 percent of graduates go on to a college or university, some even to Ivy League schools.

At the Bronx Academy for Software Engineering students learn coding and obtain coveted internships, and 100 percent of this year’s graduating class has applied to college.

Right here on this campus, we have schools that place students in internships ranging from engineering to the arts. Students here graduate at high rates, take college level courses and win distinguished scholarships.

However, we still have so much work to do. In “A Bronx Tale,” Sonny famously tells C. that “the saddest thing in life is wasted talent.” A shocking 74 percent of all Bronx students grades 3-8 are not proficient in reading and writing. That means only about 1 in 4 is at grade level. The picture is equally dismal for math. And despite the much touted improved graduation rates in the city and state, the Bronx is left behind with a graduation rate of just 63 percent.

Many of these graduates are unprepared for college. Did you know that only 37 percent of high school students citywide meet CUNY’s college readiness standards in English and Math? This disparity must end.

We cannot continue to see talent wasted. The time to give our children the education they deserve is now.

The school planning and siting process must be fixed. The DOE relies on lagging indicators like outdated census data and does not sufficiently take into account new rezonings and the imminent residential construction.

An analysis by Class Size Matters found that more than 55,000 Bronx children were sitting in overcrowded classrooms. Additionally, the City is failing to fund the number of school seats the DOE admits are needed. In August, I wrote a letter to Mayor de Blasio requesting that he convene a commission to examine the issue. We still await his response.

Our children are also being denied the opportunity to achieve at the highest level. The DOE forgoes gifted classes for our youngest students, with no credible explanation given. Then, when our middle schoolers fail to make our specialized high schools, the same agency feigns incredulity. Perhaps if they exposed more of our students to high-level classwork at an earlier age, more of them would be prepared for that work by the time they got to high school.

But we will develop solutions. Last month I announced the launch of a Specialized High School Task Force with my Brooklyn counterpart, Eric Adams. We will hear from parents and educators from across the city on the issues that are keeping our kids out of Bronx Science, Stuyvesant, Brooklyn Tech and other educational environments that nurture gifted students to achieve their full potential.

Fairness demands that we change the status quo, not just in our schools but in our criminal justice system too. We will pursue the appropriate legislative and administrative measures for more judges in The Bronx, where the courts are well-known to be overburdened, and where we do not have the judicial resources we are due under the law.

We must raise the age at which non-violent offenders are tried as adults from 16 to 18. We should not condemn our children to the adult justice system.

The City has proposed putting \$170 million into the Horizon Juvenile Detention Center in The Hub. How is it sensible policy to spend these sums on locking up adolescents when the city refuses to fund the surrounding schools at appropriate levels? How can we in good conscience look parents in the eye and tell them we’re going to put tens of millions of dollars into the expansion of a detention center without parity for their neighborhood schools?

Another issue that demands our urgent attention is mental health. Mental illness transcends institutions from the criminal justice system to the educational system, and requires better citywide solutions.

For example, what happened to Deborah Danner was wrong. Her tragic death highlights the challenges involved with the policies and practices regarding first responders confronting mental illness.

For decades, this city has not done nearly enough to provide mental health services to those who need them. This lack of assistance for a vulnerable population is unsustainable. And we applaud First Lady Chirlane McCray for her leadership on this issue.

The first instance of treatment for an individual with a mental health issue should not be a prison. I am calling for the City's Departments of Education and Health to conduct an assessment of how mental health services in our schools can be improved to better reach students in need. It is a matter of citywide urgency and importance. A holistic approach requires us to meet these challenges with compassion, not force.

Compassion seems to be lacking these days, doesn't it? It has been replaced by derision and divisiveness. The sometimes unhinged, often dangerous rhetoric we hear from Washington, from the new president, is a threat to all we have accomplished.

One of the most disturbing aspects of the Trump administration has been its hateful remarks and policies on immigrants. We have heard reports of plans for mass deportation and an absurd Muslim registry. And, of course, there is his oh so famous wall...the wall he said Mexico would pay for. But I guess those were "alternative facts."

I have heard real concern from many of our neighbors. People are afraid of their families being torn apart. Forty percent of all Bronx residents were born in another country, and we embrace this diversity wholeheartedly. Without our amazing immigrant population, we would not be what we are today.

Where would we be without people like Inspector Ruel R. Stephenson of the 47th Precinct, an immigrant from Jamaica, who has reestablished community trust in the NYPD in the Northeast Bronx after it was shattered with the tragic death of Ramarley Graham?

Where would we be without people like my dear, departed friend, Alfredo Thiebaud, an immigrant from Nicaragua who built the iconic Delicioso Coco Helado from a single pushcart into a business that has employed thousands of entrepreneurs—many like himself who just needed a chance?

Where would we be without people like Kadiatou Diallo, born in Guinea, who turned the tragedy of the death of her son Amadou into a driving force for social change?

And where would we be without a pioneer like Adriano Espaillat, who rose from humble beginnings as an undocumented immigrant to become the first-ever Dominican-

American elected to the United States Congress?

The immigrant story and our success are deeply intertwined. New York City is a sanctuary city, and we are proud of that designation. And New York has the opportunity to cement its status as a sanctuary state by extending additional protections and passing the Liberty Act.

This borough and this city will remain a welcoming home for all people, including our immigrant population, no matter how high the level of hatred and invective rises in Washington.

“Ne cede malis.” “Do not yield to evil” reads the official Bronx seal. We shall not.

President Trump would do well to proceed according to the guiding words of another Republican President, Abraham Lincoln: “With malice toward none, with charity for all.”

The Bronx story is one of new immigrant populations and resiliency. Our borough demands attention and sensible, well-considered national urban policy that adequately provides opportunity here as we grow. I will continue to tirelessly advocate for Bronxites and for true equity and prosperity for all New Yorkers. We must stop Washington’s anti-immigrant agenda because most of us are the descendants of immigrants who arrived in this great country for a new start and opportunity.

We will make our voices heard. *Nos van a tener que escuchar.*

However, we must not simply isolate ourselves from those who are different from us. We must engage in debate and refute opposing viewpoints with logic and facts rather than ad hominem attacks. For the good of our democracy, we must be willing to engage with those with whom we disagree.

Everywhere today, we see examples of our own echo-chambers. We are not prepared to be uncomfortable. Yet inclusion and unity demands not only tolerance and acceptance, but also that we break out of our silos and avoid self-segregation.

Just like on the national level, local politics will often choose vitriol over consensus. Look to the nature of the conversation on public and charter schools that ignores a sensible middle ground, or the near permanent tension between shelter operators and the neighborhoods where shelters are built. This division is not good for us and it does not strengthen our great City at a time in which, more than ever before we must support each other.

It was the namesake of this school building, President John F. Kennedy, who spent his childhood years just a few blocks from here in Riverdale, who said, “Let us not seek the Republican answer or the Democratic answer, but the right answer. Let us not seek to fix the blame for the past. Let us accept our own responsibility for the future.”

In keeping with these wise words, let us make divisiveness a thing of the past and make solidarity our agenda for the future.

We must support one another. For the health of this city, and for the greater good of our nation, we must do more to listen to each other's voices. We need not be so polarizing. Charter and public schools serve the same population. There is a human face to homelessness. We can develop a plan to eradicate chronic poverty and promote prosperity.

We can create an environment that works for both job creators and their workers. We can innovate through green development in a way that benefits both landlords and tenants. In this great city of ours, we can unite and flourish together.

It was the great civil rights leader, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who said, "Let us be those creative dissenters who will call our beloved nation to a higher destiny. To a new plateau of compassion, to a more noble expression of humanness." That is the work of our time.

We are at our best when we work together. We can disagree, but we must be civil in our disagreement. Our best way forward is to thrive through collaboration, good-spirited competition, and cooperation.

We will flourish together. And our success is that of the Bronx and the City.