

Remarks of Mayor Noam Bramson
State of the City Address
“Opportunities & Decisions”
March 13, 2008

First, my thanks to you, President Dursi, to Denise Lally, and to the entire Chamber of Commerce for once again organizing this event, and for your outstanding work throughout the year.

Members of the City Council, City Manager Strome, staff and colleagues in government, distinguished community leaders, my fellow citizens:

Because of the excellence of our schools, the safety of our streets, the charm of our neighborhoods, the beauty of our parks, the resurgence of our downtown, and, above all, the dynamism and diversity of our people, the state of our city today is strong.

If we now face our critical choices with wisdom and courage, then the state of our city tomorrow will be far stronger.

Much has changed since we last we met.

Our Council, half of its membership new. Six individuals with diverse views and perspectives. Yet united in the common purpose of improving New Rochelle. It is a privilege to work with Council Members Trangucci, Tarantino, Stowe, St. Paul, Fertel, and Sussman, and I ask you now to join me in acknowledging their leadership.

Changed also is our national economy, that now poses new challenges to our fiscal health and investment climate, and to the financial security of many local families.

But something else has changed, too.

Our community itself, filled now with the hope and confidence that come from real accomplishment.

Let there be no doubt. Whatever the ups and downs of the financial markets or the give and take of the political process, in New Rochelle the days of drift and decline are over, and we have it within ourselves to forge our own future.

It is a thrilling responsibility. And a heavy one. The decisions before us – this year more than any in memory – are significant and far-reaching. To seize fully the moment, we must be clear in our purpose.

So tonight, I will break with tradition.

I will not present a comprehensive report on City goals and community achievements, though many could be cited.

Nor will I offer a long list of thanks and accolades, though many have been earned.

My message is short and direct:

The biggest opportunities require the toughest decisions.

Opportunity Number One: Achieve a critical mass of new investment in our downtown.

Opportunity Number Two: Place environmental sustainability at the heart of municipal action.

And Opportunity Number Three: Seize a once-in-a-generation chance to reclaim our waterfront.

On each of these priorities, we are challenged to set aside the small passions of personality or party, and with a largeness of spirit, and only conscience and the common good as our guides, make decisions that stand the judgment of time.

This evening, together, let us explore these opportunities.

OUR DOWNTOWN

The potential in our downtown is vast.

And, make no mistake, this is a priority for all of New Rochelle. In every corner of our city, lives are touched by the economy we share, by the public institutions upon which we depend, and by the civic image that tangibly impacts our property values and intangibly shapes our pride.

We are linked together, with downtown at the heart.

For those who remember the days of vacant lots and fading hopes, the pace and scale of change in the past few years has been breath-taking.

The restoration of historic facades, led by the BID. The construction of hundreds of new housing units. The creation of a beautiful park at our Library's gate. Hundreds of millions in private investment demonstrating confidence in New Rochelle's future. And just in recent weeks, the news, so eagerly-awaited and actively-pursued, that for the first time in two decades, department stores are returning to downtown New Rochelle.

There's no denying the positive trend.

And one of the very best barometers of downtown's health is our growing, diverse restaurant scene. In just the short time that I have been Mayor, I've been delighted to witness the openings of Rangoli, Da Vinci's, Emporio Gelato, Kaffeine, Bella Bella, The Speckled Door, Mo's, the Gnarly Vine, and more.

Many of the chefs and entrepreneurs who created these establishments are with us tonight, and I want to ask them to stand.

These are examples of the men and women, who, storefront by storefront, risk by risk, and plate by plate, are turning downtown New Rochelle into the community we all want, and they're doing it in one of the hardest businesses around. Not visible from miles away, but the kind of ground-level fundamental change that makes a city lively and unique.

We owe it to those who take such risks, and we owe it to ourselves, to ensure that the trend of positive change not end today, but rise to a higher level of success.

Like many of you, there are days when I'll walk down a particular block and the light is hitting just so, and I'll think, wow – look at how much we've done. And there are other days on different blocks, when I'll think – boy, we've got a lot of work to do. The truth is: both perceptions are accurate. And anyone who denies one or the other is not telling the whole truth.

The improvements, though great, are still uneven and unfinished, and we have a long way to go.

We must work for a more balanced economy, with office space and additional retail to complement the strong elements of housing, entertainment, and services. We need reinvestment at the critical, visible locations that most fully define downtown's health. We need higher standards for the design of our skyline to assert firmly our pride in place. We need more public space to bring human and cultural vitality to our business center. And, where areas are faded or underutilized, we need light, activity, and energy.

There is a place and a plan for achieving these goals.

On the central, super-block between Huguenot, North, Anderson, and Lecount, at what planners call our 100% corner, we have a chance to take the next step forward.

Lecount Square includes 380,000 square feet of Class A office space, a new hotel, more than 200,000 square feet of retail. An acre of open space. Almost two thousand new jobs. And millions in new property and sales tax revenue – funds that are reinvested in the police who keep us safe, the parks that let us breathe, the schools that nurture our kids, the fire fighters who are first to respond, the crews that keep us clean.

And customers, residents, workers who together form a market for even better goods and services throughout the Main Street area.

This single project has the capacity to bring our downtown across the tipping point and stimulate a virtuous cycle of new investment. In my judgment, it will contribute immeasurably to our future.

Yet achieving this vision, here and at other critical sites, entails tough decisions and the acceptance of change.

First, scale. When it comes to working with developers, remember Ronald Reagan's old maxim: "trust, but verify." In this case, the City's own independent economic analysis confirms that viable development of the block requires density greater than the norm in New Rochelle, and this will need our consideration.

Second, crowds. A healthy downtown is all about people – diners, shoppers, employees. And although thoughtful planning for pedestrians and mass transit can limit impacts, we must prepare for and manage the inevitable by-products of success, such as traffic levels and parking demands.

Third, design. The physical prominence of a new development at this site could well make it one of New Rochelle's defining features, and so we should be especially sensitive to matters of appearance, at both street level and above.

Ease of access to open space, delivery of services, wastewater infrastructure – the list goes on and on. All of these far-reaching effects must be carefully assessed, and they will.

But let these be challenges to do the job well, not excuses to cast the job aside.

The heart of the matter, the heart of the choice, is this: achieving the economic and planning benefits we need and desire means embracing fully the conception of downtown New Rochelle as a city.

Some view this with excitement, others with doubt. All deserve respect. After all, the memory of our beloved community as it was fifty years ago holds a powerful appeal, but nostalgia is not a plan. We cannot turn back, and a vision aimed at the vibrant New Rochelle of 1950 is more likely to produce the dying New Rochelle of 1990.

Our vision must look ahead to see and build our city as it can and should be in this century and beyond. An engine of prosperity for our region. Where every part of our community, people of every circumstance and heritage are welcomed and find places of commerce and culture. Alive morning, noon, and night.

We have begun to create here this place. Now, with absolute conviction that our future will be better than our past, let us finish the job.

OUR ENVIRONMENT

Our next big opportunity concerns the environment.

Every day brings a fresh reminder of the Earth's fragile condition. Global climate change, rising energy costs, conflicts driven by the strategic value of oil. I have no illusions about the capacity of a single, mid-sized community to confront these conditions. No city alone can make a real difference. But all cities acting together . . . that's something else entirely. And New Rochelle must do its part.

Fortunately, we can tap the expertise and commitment of our own people to help show the way.

For the past year, we've been privileged to benefit from the hard work of our Environmental Conservation Advisory Committee, volunteers who have given their time and energy to the common good. Several of its members are here tonight: Herb Fox, Lisa Davis, Paula DeCaro, and David Schlecker. Let's thank them for their dedication.

With their help, and with the help of so many other engaged citizens, we will chart a sustainable course.

It begins with a comprehensive policy of smart growth and transit-oriented development.

You've already heard my views about our downtown. And it may seem counter-intuitive to some, but, from a regional and national perspective, high-rise residential construction in an urban center is sound environmental policy, because it provides an alternative to the urban sprawl that consumes far more energy and land, and because it concentrates population where infrastructure can support it, where mass transit is readily accessible, and where goods and services can be reached on foot.

Elsewhere in New Rochelle, however, sustainability means something very different. It means holding the line on growth, protecting the character of neighborhoods, and ensuring that the suburban quality of life so many of us value will be preserved.

We're meeting this commitment by down-zoning many of our single-family and multi-family areas, by protecting open space, by improving our parkland, and by celebrating our history.

Now it's time to take the next steps.

Let's set a positive example as a government by reducing our own energy use and by tapping renewable energy sources. In 2006, we upgraded all of our traffic signals to efficient LED fixtures. Last year, we installed energy-saving fluorescent light bulbs in City Hall, and this year, for the first time, we will convert one of our sanitation trucks to hybrid electric. All steps on the road to creating a green public sector.

And then let's make New Rochelle a leader in the green building movement. Most people don't realize that building construction, maintenance, and operations account for about 40% of our energy consumption and CO2 emissions. What's more, we spend most of our lives in enclosed structures, with our well-being impacted by air quality, temperature, light. So green building design is an essential way to promote public health, as well as fight climate change.

The Council and City staff have already begun wrestling with this challenge. And together, by the end of this year, we can adopt the strongest green building policy in all of Westchester.

Like downtown development, stewardship of the environment entails difficult choices. Decisions about resource allocation, new demands on investors and builders, constraints on some private property rights. Every action must be measured and weighed carefully.

But the rewards are beyond measure. A city and world we turn over to our children and grandchildren with pride, knowing it is shaped still by the gifts entrusted to each of us by nature and the Almighty.

OUR WATERFRONT

Among the greatest of these gifts is New Rochelle's waterfront. It is a defining feature – perhaps the defining feature – of our geography and history. But we all know its potential has long been unrealized. And this affects real people.

If you have any doubt, I want you to meet Patricia Kruck. I know it's usually considered unseemly to mention the age of a lady, but Mrs. Kruck has given me permission to say that she will turn 73 later this year. Her whole life, Mrs. Kruck's family has lived in the same house on Lispenard Avenue in the east end of New Rochelle, just a few hundred feet from the shore of Long Island Sound.

In all that time, decade after decade, Mrs. Kruck has never been able to enjoy the simple pleasure of walking from her home directly to an unspoiled water's edge. In all that time, the shoreline has been locked away, neglected, and almost invisible.

And she is not alone. There are hundreds, thousands of us, who could tell a similar tale.

Go there today and you will find a parking lot for sanitation trucks, an abandoned electrical substation, environmental waste, storage yards, industrial activities, some with value – but all uses that, if we were starting from scratch, we would never dream of placing on prime waterfront property.

Every part of New Rochelle is diminished as a result. Every one of us is denied opportunities to shop or play or simply enjoy the beauty of nature. The fact that one can be a stone's throw from the water's edge and have no sense of being near the shore should be a source of restless discontent to a city that deserves and aspires to better.

It is time for this to change.

Our efforts at Echo Bay are the most ambitious in New Rochelle's modern history.

In place of a decaying and contaminated wasteland, imagine more than five acres of parks, imagine a shoreline promenade almost a mile long, all completely open to the public, imagine new shops and cafes, imagine green buildings that enhance the environment, imagine a village shaped in modest scale and in harmony with its surroundings, with many homes that are affordable to our middle class.

We established these planning principles through open community dialogue dating back six years and involving hundreds of residents; then selected a capable and committed partner following a nation-wide competition; and now have unveiled a comprehensive proposal based on months of discussion and negotiation.

There's much more still to do, including a detailed environmental analysis. But just picture, by the end of this decade, standing on Main Street, looking to the south, and seeing, for the first time in our lives, a clear view of the water.

This is a compelling vision for the future of Echo Bay and the future of New Rochelle – supported, I believe, by the vast majority of our neighbors. But it won't be achieved by wishes alone. Like everything else I have discussed tonight, perhaps more than everything I have discussed tonight, it involves – and requires – hard work and hard choices.

In particular, two uses in the core of the development area must be relocated with sensitivity and care.

One is City Yard, where we maintain our DPW fleet and equipment.

Many people mistakenly believe that City Yard is a place for the storage of trash or hazardous materials. In fact, it functions more like a garage and dispatch office. Even so, let's be honest. In a fully built-out community, there is no area where such a facility will be welcomed, and few locations where the five acres it needs can be even theoretically assembled.

But it must go somewhere. The site chosen by our professional staff - after a lengthy, open-ended look at options – sits between an interstate highway on one side and railroad tracks on the other. In an area zoned for industry, where current and potential private activities are, frankly, far more impactful with respect to noise and traffic than a controlled public use. Every bit of analysis reveals that the effects of the new City Yard will be modest.

Please don't misunderstand me. We should never take such an action lightly. And those with homes or businesses near Beechwood Avenue deserve our assurance and commitment that the new City Yard will aim to respect its surroundings.

But the critical importance of this decision and the absence of real alternatives compel me to speak plainly. Rejecting this location would, at a minimum, cost the taxpayers millions and set back our waterfront renewal efforts for years. More likely, it would extinguish our hopes for Echo Bay entirely.

And that is an outcome none of us can in good conscience accept. So let us work together to accomplish this move, and with the care it deserves.

The other use demanding sensitivity is the abandoned Armory.

The building itself has never been, as some have implied, a memorial or monument. Its purpose has been operational, functional – and that purpose that has long since passed. Nonetheless, like many who value historic preservation and like all who respect and honor our veterans, I began this process with the hope that a rehabilitated Armory could be part of the new Echo Bay. I have been convinced by the overwhelming weight of evidence that it cannot.

It's not simply the huge cost of restoring, maintaining, and operating a building so large and in such poor condition, or the absence of a clear and practical use for it, although these are themselves tremendous obstacles. The bigger problem is how preservation of the Armory would impact the rest of Echo Bay.

Because the Armory consumes so much land in the heart of the project area, preserving it would mean increasing density everywhere else, pushing buildings, now planned at five stories or less, up to ten stories or more, and eliminating much of the open space and parkland. The resulting design would contain far fewer public benefits at a much higher public cost.

It doesn't meet the tests of planning, of economics, or of common-sense. It cannot work.

Fortunately, through compromise and dialogue, we can present a respectful and responsible alternative.

A new armory and public center on Echo Avenue, with meeting space, programming, and services that benefit our community, most especially veterans' organizations. A building that pays tribute to the past by preserving and incorporating the old armory's doors, murals, anchors, and other distinctive architectural features.

This is the very model of a reasonable compromise demonstrating genuine and well-deserved regard for the Armory's legacy.

I know there are some who will oppose this solution. It's hard, when passions are bound up in a place. Particularly when those passions are expressed by men and women with almost unique moral standing to speak their minds.

I can scarcely imagine the courage and bravery of those who have served, and I can't claim to share the depth of emotion some have described in confronting this issue. Yet all of us, I think, in our own ways, have faced difficult choices like this.

For some, it is moving from a home filled with cherished memory, after family has gone, and the rooms and halls have grown too large and empty. Or letting a child of a certain age find their own way in the world, when one longs, in truth, to protect them forever. Or the terrible burden of end-of-life decisions for a loved one, almost too painful to bear.

All of us, every one of us, in our own ways, have faced difficult choices like this, when our emotions lead in one direction and sober judgment in another. When our heads and our hearts speak to us in different voices.

These are not perfect analogies for the present situation. There is no perfect analogy, but please understand my point.

On this public issue, we must be ruled by our heads as much as our hearts. Affirming that substance matters more than symbolism, and that real improvements in the lives of veterans – and in the life of our city – are of greater value than a building, cared for, but empty and unusable.

It does no honor to those who have sacrificed for our community to block, in their name, an effort that would so greatly enhance our community.

So I understand these are difficult steps, both of them, but they are necessary steps. Because unless we take them, Echo Bay will remain contaminated and closed to the public for yet another generation. And we will have missed this chance, unique in its moment and urgency, to create a better future for all of New Rochelle.

I am confident, because I have faith in the people of our city to make these decisions with strength, compassion, and foresight. And because the fruits of success are there for all of us to see and taste . . .

The day, now not so distant, when Mrs. Kruck and her family, including her three grandchildren, and anyone who wants to join them, stroll down a new view street past the shops of Echo Bay teeming with life, to the new Village Green in which families play, to the expanding vista of the shore, and together, for the first time, in this setting, look out on the water of the bay.

That is what this is about. Mrs. Kruck and the thousands more like her, who deserve to call home a place that truly earns the name Queen City of the Sound.

THE CHOICE

I have spoken tonight in very direct terms, placing these issues in stark relief for our common consideration, because I believe it my duty to do so. And because the size of the opportunities before us requires that we be equally large in our courage and determination.

There are moments when the normal rush of history comes to a pause. And we can see with clarity that the future of a place and its people is not fixed or pre-destined, but stretches instead along many roads.

And then comes the choice.

The easy road asks very little. One need only accede to the pressures of the moment or perhaps do nothing at all.

There will be no controversy. No attacks in public hearings or letters to the editor. No hard work. No coalitions to build. No interest groups to persuade. And if things go badly, you can always point the finger at someone else.

It is easy, because it moves steadily downhill. And only years or decades later, after opportunities have passed and hope has quietly dwindled, do those at the road's end look around and wonder how it all went wrong.

I have learned as an observer and practitioner of government that dissent is the inevitable partner of action. Deserving always of dialogue and an open-mind, but never of fear or retreat from principle. Especially when it matters most, to act is to take the harder road . . . in the knowledge that it leads to the higher place.

So with enthusiasm for the great work ahead, with confidence in the good faith and good will of our neighbors, with respect for the past and passion for the future, and with love for our city and everything it represents, let us go forward together and meet the tests of our time.

Thank you and God bless you all.