

**Remarks of Mayor Noam Bramson**  
**State of the City Address**  
**March 19, 2009**

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

I need not detail the poor condition of the economy. The toll of the present crisis on families and businesses is well known to all.

Each of us is touched personally, or has friends – here in our city – struggling to make home payments, wondering about the next paycheck, fearful about retirement assets. Even those with secure personal finances are affected by an economy with the potential to impact whole neighborhoods, whole communities.

We are bound together in this crisis and called together to overcome it.

In this spirit, we pray as one that our national leaders will guide America and the world back to prosperity.

And in this spirit, also, we accept our local duties, modest in comparison to those of Washington, but large, nonetheless, in their significance to the future of New Rochelle.

A duty, first, to shelter our community from the worst of the economic storm. This means preserving our fiscal health and integrity, maintaining the most essential of our services, and embracing with care each of our neighbors.

And a duty, second, to plan and prepare for the inevitable day when the storm will end, so that, with confidence in our city's enduring strengths, we are poised for an immediate resurgence of progress.

The state of a city should never be measured by the scale of its challenges, but rather by the wisdom and determination with which it meets them. So, I say to you tonight, without fear of contradiction and fully mindful of the hard work ahead, that the state of our city is strong.

#### FISCAL RESPONSIBILITY

For government, sound economic management begins with responsible budgets, that are honest in their assumptions and clear in their priorities.

To address the impact of the slowing economy on City revenues and to control the burden of taxes imposed on property owners, our Council and staff have already cut spending by some three million dollars, deferred capital expenditures, imposed a partial hiring freeze, and placed a hold on nonessential programs.

Such steps are not taken lightly. The initiatives and investments we have cancelled or delayed are all worthwhile, and these cuts are implemented in the context of an already lean budget.

Nonetheless, at a time when many of our residents are struggling to make ends meet, and forced to do more with less, government must also make hard choices.

Coupled with a long-standing policy of fiscal conservatism, these actions were sufficient to balance the 2009 budget without exhausting our fund balance.

The federal stimulus package will also help by directing block grant assistance to New Rochelle and, possibly, providing resources for various infrastructure and capital needs.

For the moment, we are on sound financial footing, and unlike some institutions in the news, we don't need a bailout to maintain our solvency.

But, if the recession deepens or lasts beyond this calendar year, then our actions to-date will prove insufficient.

Therefore, although we all hope for quick turnaround, prudence demands that we do more to achieve efficiencies and savings, and to bolster our financial reserves as a hedge against further economic stress.

To meet this challenge, we propose a wide-ranging strategy.

First, we must change the culture of government itself, so that short and long term resource savings become embedded in our day-to-day operations. The City is already implementing measures to reduce energy use and boost recycling rates, to conserve materials and enhance technology, all with the goal of cutting costs.

Next, we must work creatively to secure revenue alternatives to the property tax, so that we can fund our core services, without handing an ever-larger bill to homeowners.

For example, New Rochelle – and all the cities of New York – should have the authority to set our own tax rate for utility gross receipts. The current rate here is 1%, charged directly to large companies like Con Ed and United Water. Simply raising the rate to 3 – the same amount charged in Yonkers, Rochester, and Buffalo – would achieve a 7% reduction in our property taxes, while also providing incentives for energy and water conservation.

No one likes taxes in any form, but if we have to raise revenue, we should choose the best and fairest way to do it.

In addition, the City is working with our State representatives to adopt a hotel occupancy tax – a measure before the Legislature at this moment – that would generate an estimated quarter million dollars every year.

Third, we are studying new methods of delivering public works services, with sizable potential savings: on the one hand, a shift in the sanitation schedule that would reduce the frequency of garbage collection while adding an extra recycling pick-up each week, and, on the other hand, a requirement that leaves be bagged for pick-up.

These changes could impact every resident on an almost daily basis, and it would be foolhardy to rush into a new policy without thorough public consultation and broad public support. But understand that we cannot cling blindly to old habits that no longer serve our community well – our minds must be open to changes, even those that require personal adjustment.

To begin the conversation, the Council has assembled focus groups of neighborhood leaders, and I look forward to a constructive dialogue, with every reasonable option on the table.

Finally, our management team has initiated discussion with labor representatives aimed at deferring contractual salary increases. Because the overwhelming majority of City expenditures cover compensation for municipal employees, this is truly the only means of achieving significant savings in our budget. Everything else is marginal by comparison.

To some, this may seem like an easy step. After all, many employees in the private sector have lost their jobs entirely and many more are accepting pay cuts.

But recall that, during the good times, police officers, fire fighters, sanitation workers, and other municipal employees received no large bonuses and no generous stock options.

They undertook their responsibilities, which involve risks to health and safety – and, in many cases, back-breaking labor – out of commitment to public service and with the primary personal benefit of employment stability. So when we suggest that raises be deferred, we are asking for substantial sacrifice.

In New Rochelle's system of government, it is not the place of elected officials to engage in collective bargaining, either publicly or privately. Tonight, I simply make an appeal to the civic patriotism of our workforce, with the knowledge that, whatever our specific roles and positions, together we care deeply about the City we serve. And with the knowledge, too, that without deferrals, damaging cuts in personnel may be unavoidable.

I hope all citizens present today and all listening at home, will support our City workers in their daily labors – which they perform so well – and support them, too, in agreeing to difficult choices about our shared future.

If we do these things, then the City of New Rochelle will remain a pillar of fiscal stability in the midst of the storm – able to safeguard our community, and able to provide the quality of life that the people of New Rochelle expect and deserve.

With common sense and the common good as our guides, we can and we will accomplish this purpose.

## PLANNING & DEVELOPMENT

The government balance sheet, however, is only one measure of the economic crisis and of our response to it.

Just as important, if not more so, is the business and investment climate and its impact on our growth and development goals.

For almost a generation, New Rochelle has pursued a forward-looking policy of transit-oriented smart growth, with two fundamental features:

One, attracting investment to our central core, where land use characteristics and infrastructure are most appropriate for additional density, where the benefits of new population and buying power can most directly stimulate the local economy, and where alternatives to automobile dependency are most readily available.

And, two, limiting and controlling growth in our neighborhoods to protect their suburban character, history, and natural beauty.

Any fair reading of the last decade must acknowledge that our progress has been real and dramatic.

Gone are the empty lots that once defined a city in decline. In their place is the emerging framework of a more vibrant place, closer to the potential of its ideal location and impressive human talent.

Gone, too, are zoning policies that wrongly permitted overgrowth, subdivision, and out-of-scale construction, replaced today by sensible regulation of size and design, as well as new protections for much of our open space.

This is a better city because of all we have done together.

But let's not deny the obvious. The overall economic climate defines the scope of possible action. And in this current environment, with a soft housing market and with investment capital in short supply, the next steps forward will not come as swiftly or as easily as we would like.

Most of us are realists, ready to demonstrate patience, persistence, and flexibility in response to changing conditions.

What we will not do – what we must not do – is abandon the smart growth strategy that remains the best and only route to future success.

Let me state this clearly: having come so far and achieved so much, we will never permit this City to fall behind again.

To maintain our positive momentum, I suggest the following:

First, let us continue our vigorous pursuit of the critical projects with the greatest positive potential for New Rochelle.

In the downtown, a bipartisan Council majority has just recently approved the environmental review for Lecount Square, completing a thorough analysis of the largest and most diversified downtown development proposal in New Rochelle's history.

Several obstacles must still be overcome before construction on this mixed-use project can proceed, but I am proud and grateful that our community is largely united behind the vision of our downtown's future represented by Lecount Square, and I look forward to the surge of economic vitality that will be unleashed when Lecount begins construction.

At the Echo Bay waterfront, we are poised to realize a dream a century in the making, recapturing the shoreline for the public's benefit and enjoyment, replacing contaminated and abandoned uses, with parks, promenades, shops, and a neighborhood fully integrated into the fabric of New Rochelle.

At a time when dozens of projects throughout the nation are being cancelled, our partner in this venture has reaffirmed its commitment to moving forward. And although we recognize that the timing of this initiative will be impacted by the economy, we must and will take the critical steps that can unlock the vast potential of our waterfront – for ourselves, our children, and our grandchildren.

At the same time, let us work closely with the Chamber of Commerce and the Business Improvement District to help smaller local businesses survive and prosper.

Some business-owners, including quite a few present this evening, have been cornerstones of the New Rochelle community for decades, others have chosen to invest in New Rochelle more recently as our fortunes have gradually improved.

These risk-takers and entrepreneurs deserve our support, now more than ever. And because building the City we all want depends upon their success, we truly are in this together.

The Council has already reprogrammed funds once intended for retail recruitment to instead serve the purpose of business retention and assistance. And in this spirit, we stand proudly behind creative initiatives, underway right now, to support our restaurants, attract new artists to the downtown, expand awning and historic façade improvements, and otherwise make clear that New Rochelle's downtown remains a great place to live, work, dine, shop, and play.

Lastly, we must have the vision to look beyond the present crisis and plan for the next phase of the City's growth and evolution.

Indeed, if there is a silver lining in the present downturn, it is that, without the external pressure of specific project deadlines, our community is afforded an opportunity to plan thoughtfully and

proactively.

We've already completed an analysis of the development potential for the Garden Street corridor, a site with unparalleled access to both rail and highway transportation. And we're undertaking a similar analysis for the Church-Division and Prospect lots, critical sites with great potential to boost the downtown economy.

We've launched a full-scale environmental review of zoning options for the North Avenue corridor, the spine of our City, and the gateway to neighborhoods containing thousands of residents. And we're exploring the potential of the Burling triangle, a long-neglected area, ideally suited for transit-oriented development.

Now . . . the argument is sometimes made that we should wait until economic conditions improve before undertaking such planning. My view is entirely different. The worst thing we could possibly do is sit on our hands, while fate overtakes us, and opportunities pass us by.

This is exactly the right time to craft and pursue our own vision of the City's future, so that we are fully prepared to hit the ground running when the economy recovers, and so that we don't waste six months, a year, two years of a good economy doing the work that we can accomplish and bank away right now.

The hallmark of every successful city – and, for that matter, every successful nation and society – is a focus on the future, looking to and preparing for the next step.

Let us accept this mission gladly, and earn the gratitude of those who will inherit our works.

## ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

If economic and budgetary policies depend in part on external circumstances and conditions over which we have limited control, there are other critical priorities that do not rise or fall with markets, that instead are functions of our own will and determination.

That is why I am so proud of our city's strong commitment to environmental sustainability.

During the past decade, we have done so much to position New Rochelle as an environmental leader.

We secured hundreds of acres of open space, preserving our natural heritage and biodiversity.

We've acted to improve water quality in Long Island Sound, by controlling run-off and erosion, upgrading our storm water and waste-water infrastructure, and restoring critical wetlands.

We've reduced energy consumption by utilizing electric vehicles, installing efficient lighting, and exploring performance contracting as a tool for comprehensive energy improvements.

And we've just crafted a new green building policy that protects consumers, saves money, and ensures that both renovations and new construction meet the test of energy efficiency.

Why is this important? Because if we are ever to address the challenges of energy independence and climate change, then each of us, every individual, every city, will have to accept responsibility for doing our part.

And besides, there are significant, local, practical considerations. It's not just respect for nature that prompts our actions. It's about our economy, our expenses, our health, and our civic image.

Indeed, on this issue, perhaps more than any other, the parochial needs of this community, go hand-in-hand with the broad interests of all Americans and all citizens of the world.

Now, we have a unique opportunity to take another big step forward.

Earlier this year, the premier international umbrella organization for sustainable communities, called ICLEI, announced an exciting initiative: a handful of cities throughout the nation would be selected through a competitive process to work with ICLEI staff to craft local versions of New York City's PlaNYC.

PlaNYC is widely regarded as the best long-term municipal planning document in America. I encourage you to look it up on the Internet. You'll see an integrated approach to transportation, infrastructure, land use, and much more, with clear objectives and metrics to measure progress.

More than twenty cities applied for this tremendous opportunity to tap into ICLEI's expertise. Tonight, I am thrilled to report that, along with Newark and Miami-Dade, New Rochelle is one of just three cities to be chosen.

So I hope that when I appear before you a year from today, I will be able to tout not only a list of achievements related to environmental management, but also to share an comprehensive blueprint, based on national-caliber knowledge and local community input, for meeting the critical planning challenges of this century, with tremendous potential benefits for all residents of New Rochelle.

## COMING TOGETHER

I have spoken tonight primarily about the role and responsibility of the public sector.

But we must remember that the character and strength of this city is defined by much more than municipal budgets and laws.

Especially at a moment of great challenge, each of us is called to action.

Maybe it is checking in on an elderly neighbor, maybe volunteering for a charitable organization, maybe helping a friend in financial need. Even acts of seeming self-indulgence – like eating

dinner out at a local restaurant, or buying a gift from a local merchant – can be, in a time of economic distress, a meaningful gesture of solidarity and support for those who depend upon the bonds of commerce.

There are countless examples of citizens and groups, houses of worship and not-for-profits that are rising to this occasion.

This evening, I'd like to cite just two.

By national and state standards, New Rochelle is a prosperous community, with relatively high employment and low poverty levels.

But these broad measures can be deceiving, because there are literally thousands of families – our neighbors – who need help making ends meet and ensuring that their children have the guidance, support, and nutrition to grow, learn, and thrive.

HOPE Community Services has been an invaluable resource for these families. This past year, drawing upon the enthusiastic assistance of 300 volunteers, HOPE gave out 600 Thanksgiving turkeys, distributed almost 14,000 bags of groceries, and served more than 300,000 meals.

Tonight, I ask the staff of HOPE Community Services to stand so we can thank them for upholding the humanity of our city.

Coming together also means preserving the traditions and celebrations that make New Rochelle unique and special. And there's no better example than the Thanksgiving Parade, organized every year by the New Rochelle Chamber of Commerce.

As most of you know, the parade has been supported in recent years by donations from John and Charles Valenti. We are deeply grateful for their generosity, and extend to them our sincere thanks.

This year, we learned that the Valentis could not continue their sponsorship, and that's understandable, because no donor can be expected to maintain such a commitment indefinitely, and they have already done far more than their fair share. But this raised a serious question about the parade's survival.

Tonight, happily, I can report that the parade will go on. New Rochelle's three colleges, Monroe, CNR, and Iona, cornerstones of our city in so many ways, have each agreed to contribute the funds necessary to preserve this great community celebration.

I'd like to ask the representatives of these colleges to stand, so that we can together express our appreciation for their sense of civic responsibility, and for their help in a time of need.

**LOOKING FORWARD**

The men and women I have recognized tonight are exceptional. But they might argue otherwise, and say that they simply represent the fundamental decency and spirit of common purpose that animates the work of thousands more.

This has been and will always be our greatest strength – a citizenry that is talented, generous, fiercely proud of its diversity, an able to sustain us through every trial.

And a citizenry that grasps New Rochelle’s special place in America’s story.

We are today what America will be tomorrow.

A chance – and a test – for all people to bind their disparate faiths and circumstances, their allegiances to city, suburb, and shore, their histories and their hopes – all these into a greater whole. What we do here matters everywhere.

And don’t think for a second that we will permit this economy to dim our spirits or slow our drive.

If anyone tries to tell you otherwise, remind them about all we are doing now, this year, beyond what I have already mentioned:

The Lincoln Avenue reconstruction, the second phase of the North Avenue streetscape, the reconstruction of the Library South lot, the establishment of the residential rehab program, the completion of the Colonial Greenway, the restoration of Skidelsky field and then all of City Park . . . step by step, action by action, here in the city that Business Week called the best place in all of New York State to raise kids.

Don’t try to tell me that the people of New Rochelle aren’t working hard, making a difference, and looking forward with the sure knowledge that our best days are ahead.

So let us together affirm our confidence in New Rochelle and all it represents – our determination to confront and emerge from crisis, filled with faith in our future.

Let us do this, knowing that the mission of building a healthy, vital community continues in good times and bad. And that progress can grow from seeds planted even in the worst storm.

We know our duty. We are ready for the challenge before us. And, with trust in the bonds that link and lift us all, we will succeed.

May God bless you, and may God bless our city.