

Remarks of Mayor Noam Bramson
State of the City
March 24, 2015

To my colleagues in government, community leaders, neighbors, partners, friends, and family, to those present and those watching at home: good evening.

Traditionally, the State of the City is a time to celebrate recent accomplishments, and there is a lot in New Rochelle to celebrate.

Thanks to our local business people – and their customers – the economy is looking up, with sales of everything from couches to carnitas to cars hitting a record high.

And thanks to our Police, working with the community, crime keeps going down, with 2014 recording the fewest crimes in fifty-four years.

Homeowners in New Rochelle are getting some relief, thanks to the fourth lowest city tax rate in all of New York State.

And the homeless in New Rochelle are getting some help, thanks to our new initiative with HOPE that's lifted dozens off the streets.

Our always-great Fire Fighters, together with Transcare, and now in a new, stronger partnership with Scarsdale Volunteer Ambulance, are fast on the scene to save lives.

And our always-great arts community is sponsoring murals, and sculptures, and pop-up performances – the creative energy that helps make our lives worth living.

Put it together, and it's no wonder that out of hundreds of communities from coast to coast, New Rochelle was just ranked the 13th best in America.

Traditionally, the State of the City is also a time to offer a sneak preview of coming attractions, and there is a lot that's coming.

We'll soon improve our outdoors with new master plans for Feeny and Lincoln Parks, great spaces enjoyed by thousands of families.

And we'll soon illuminate our streets with new LED lights that save those families about \$9 million over 20 years, and cut our energy use in half.

A new electric charging station will let us power up the cars of the future, right here at our transit center.

And a push for a local micro-grid will let us generate the power of the future – cheaper, cleaner, and closer to home.

We’re still working to open up our waterfront, now in a fresh partnership with Twining Properties.

And we’re still working to strengthen our core, with a new phase of Heritage Homes.

Through efforts like My Brother’s Keeper, we’ll help all of our young people enter school ready to learn and leave school ready for life.

And through a new branding and marketing strategy, we’ll encourage a generation of young people to come back here to settle and then stay here to retire.

And for everyone who’s tired of dodging craters on the streets – which is pretty much all of us – help is on the way, because we’ve tripled the budget for paving our roads.

My friends, New Rochelle is firing on all cylinders. And, traditionally, in this speech, I would elaborate on every one of those achievements, plus lots of others.

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But, ladies and gentlemen, this will not be a traditional speech.

I began with that long list, because you deserve to know about the scope of our work. But for the rest of this evening, you won’t hear another word about any of those topics.

You won’t hear many applause lines either. Or shout-outs to residents who have done good things. Or corny jokes (maybe just one or two.) Or any of the other usual elements of this address.

By now, you may be asking yourselves: “how the heck is he going to fill the next 30 minutes? Is he going to perform a song and dance number?” And if you’re suddenly, urgently wondering whether you can sneak out of here right now, the answer is no . . . the exits to the Davenport Club have been sealed. (Not really! I tried, but the Fire

Chief wouldn't allow it.)

So why? Why the unorthodox approach? Why not the typical catalog of civic issues?

Because all those accomplishments and all those plans, as important as they may be – all of them together can't fully realize our community's incredible potential, unless we get one other thing right.

I'm going to say what that one other thing is, of course, but first a little context.

Over the last couple of months, more than a thousand New Rochelle residents filled out a long survey in connection with our branding exercise. Not a scientific, representative sample, but enough to produce instructive results. And they reveal a kind of community-wide inferiority complex. A little bit about living here, a lot more about doing business here. And in most cases, our own self-assessment turns out to be much harsher than the opinions of people outside looking in.

Now don't get me wrong. I love New Rochelle. We all love New Rochelle. The people who filled out those surveys love New Rochelle. Some of us grew up here and stayed. Others were born elsewhere and came. Either way, we're all in this city by choice. We're here because we look at New Rochelle's myriad cultures, we look at its remarkable history, we look at its unparalleled location – all these connections of time, place, and spirit to the larger world – and we say: this is where I want to lay down roots and make a future. There is a genuine and heartfelt loyalty.

And yet for lots of us, it's blended together with a nagging, persistent feeling that we ought to be doing better. That with all we have going for us, somehow our city is not what it used to be, or what it could be, or what it should be.

So how do we explain that contradiction? What's this all about?

It can't be our neighborhoods, which are second to none. It can't be our schools, which have the best programming in Westchester. It can't be our creative talents, which are world-class. (It can't be our elected officials, who are, of course, universally admired and beloved. Or not.)

Speaking as a mayor and, more importantly, as a forty-five year resident, it is my opinion that this feeling of inferiority really has only a single source.

This is all about the condition of our downtown.

If it were bursting and booming, lively and festive 24-7, we wouldn't be shuffling our feet

in disappointment, we'd be beating our chests in pride.

And, not only that, the health of the downtown is linked to everything else. Our tax base, our property values, our access to jobs. Whatever you think New Rochelle's top priority ought to be, whether it's community policing, or more men on a fire engine, or more snow plows . . . we can't do it over the long term unless our local economy's growing faster. That's the gateway to all the rest. So what happens on Main Street affects every one of us.

And it's important beyond our community, too. It's important to our whole region. There is a fierce competition underway for talented younger professionals. And Westchester is losing that competition badly to places like Williamsburg and Astoria and Hoboken or even Austin, Texas.

We just don't have the right housing in the right amounts for the target market. Housing that's affordable, that's fun, and that doesn't depend on owning a car.

And what's the first thing a CEO asks when choosing a location? "Where are my employees going to live and how are they going to get to work?" Too often that question gets answered around here with a blank stare.

So that is why. That is why tonight, I'm going to set aside the full (and very wide) spectrum of actions and goals on the City's docket, and instead have a serious talk, among neighbors who share a community, who share a future, about the single preeminent challenge of making our downtown as good as we know it can be.

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Let's begin with some historical perspective. Because history tells us that we have the power to make positive change.

In the past two decades, New Rochelle's downtown has made a ton of progress.

Remember. Twenty years ago, Library Green was asphalt, Trump Plaza was an empty lot, the old mall was boarded up, and the little house on the prairie greeted folks comin' off the train. You couldn't take in a movie, you could barely get a good meal, and if someone predicted that, in 2015, a downtown apartment would rent for \$4,000 a month or a condo would sell for nearly a million, you'd want to have their head examined.

Who could seriously argue we're not better off?

We've done that, together. So the trend lines are all moving in the right direction.

They just haven't moved far enough.

That's why even the most avid booster of New Rochelle: even a Ralph DiBart, whose enthusiasm fuels the great work of the BID; even an Al Tarantino, who's made a living on Main Street his entire adult life; even a Haina Just-Michael, who slaps a fleur de lis symbol on everything but her forehead. In an honest moment, even they, or even me – a booster by personal conviction and professional obligation – would acknowledge that those good things together have not yet achieved the critical mass that makes a place as a whole ignite.

The pillars of strength and vitality are too dispersed. A great restaurant might be flanked by four or five businesses that are struggling. A beautifully rehabbed historic building might sit alone on a block. A lively scene at night can trickle into tumbleweeds by day.

We're all doing too much shopping on Sanford Boulevard or Route 22.

And terrific events like the downtown farmers market or NRCA's ArtsFest get only a fraction of the attendance that they could and should.

Potential customers and patrons may say (mistakenly) that our downtown's unsafe. Or they may say (wrongly) that there's nothing to do. Or they may say (incorrectly) that there's no parking. But what it really comes down to is that for too many of us the overall impression of Main Street just isn't appealing.

And when folks do visit, it's often a surgical strike to one destination, then over and out, when, by contrast, a truly healthy downtown encourages you to wander, to stroll, to explore, confident that there is something around the next corner worth seeing or doing. A truly healthy downtown is a destination in its entirety, not just a collection of scattered attractions.

What's missing?

A lot of people are uneasy with the word "density." And I get why. It sort of makes you think of traffic jams or concrete. All gray. (When you call someone dense, you're not exactly paying them a compliment.)

But if it's in the right place with the right design, density becomes a benefit. Give it a different name if you want – call it activity, or enterprise, or liveliness – but it's the key. Eyes and feet and wallets and minds on the street in sufficient numbers to start a virtuous cycle of vibrancy and investment.

And it isn't gray, it's green. From energy efficiency, to mass transit options, to using our own two feet to get around, a compact, thriving downtown is more green than a solar field or a wind farm. Plus green in another way, too, with sales tax to help balance our budgets.

New Rochelle's downtown has some density, it needs more. Our downtown's had a wave of development, it needs another. What's been achieved so far is both positive . . . and insufficient. And we haven't quite found the spark that's gonna light us up.

But, my friends, tonight I can report to you that we have a better opportunity to light that spark right now than at any other moment in our lives. Years of preparation have brought us to the cusp of something special. And with so much at stake, we must not, we cannot, we will not spare anything in our determination to succeed.

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So what's happening?

The lesson of the past generation is that meaningful commercial development in New Rochelle depends on three factors, all of which must be present at the same time. Think of them as three legs of a stool:

The first leg: A good economy, nationally and regionally, that provides enough fuel for investment.

The second leg: A good plan, that fosters both growth and preservation, and that hits the sweet spot between what we want and what the market will actually build.

And the third leg: Good leadership, that takes hard choices head on, works through the inevitable labor pains of change, inspires public trust, and gives investors the confidence to take risks.

When all three of those things come together, there's no stopping us. And they are coming together today.

Let's take them in order.

First, the economy. It has finally shaken off its long recession hangover. For the first time in nearly a decade, the market's got real energy, it sees money to be made – and it sees New Rochelle, especially, as an investment opportunity with big upside potential.

Need proof? In just the last few weeks, the City has received proposals for new apartments on Park Place that would transform lower North Avenue, and on Burling Lane that would expand an emerging hub of transit housing. We've received proposals for a boutique hotel on Church Street, and for a growing college district on North. We've gotten inquiries on sites everywhere from Pelham Road to Davenport Neck, up to Stratton Road and even down to Davids Island, with lots more in the pipeline of submission and review.

Not all of these proposals will make it. Some may not be consistent with our local goals – we don't necessarily want growth everywhere. The point is people are interested – so interested that our Commissioner of Development may need a new switchboard to field all the calls. We're cooking with gas.

There's just one note of caution here, and it comes from personal experience.

When I first took the oath as Mayor in 2006, Lehman Brothers and Bear Stears were widely admired for their financial acumen. Freddie Mac and Fannie Mae were like a trusted uncle and aunt. And "TARP" was something you put over a ball field to protect it from the rain.

Here in New Rochelle, hundreds of millions of dollars in investment were close to breaking ground.

Then the world changed, and that investment vanished just about overnight.

The lesson I take from 2007 and 2008 is that you'd better strike while the iron is hot, you'd better act with a sense of urgency, because as sure as the sun rises and falls, the day will come when the good times end and the window of opportunity slams shut.

But at least as we speak this evening, that window is wide open, and the first leg of our stool is solidly in place.

Which brings us to the second leg – a plan – and more good news.

The recession set us back, no doubt about it, but we didn't just hang around waiting for things to get better . . . our city used the time to prepare.

We adopted our award-winning sustainability plan to put New Rochelle on the leading edge of green development.

And completed a Transit-Oriented Development study, with detailed build-out concepts that reflect the best urban design principles.

We commissioned a forward-looking traffic analysis to ensure that cars, bikes, and walkers can all find a place in our growing downtown hub.

And we secured State funding to update our Comprehensive and Local Waterfront Revitalization Plans, both of which are rolling forward.

In partnership with the School District, we launched an unprecedented study to evaluate the interplay between housing growth and classroom capacity.

And in a blue-sky exercise with the Columbia University Urban Design Lab, we imagined alternative futures for our city as a whole.

And we're not the only ones prepping. If you haven't heard already, the MTA's ambitious capital program includes a new link between Metro-North and Penn Station. The rail line happens to split right around Webster Avenue here in New Rochelle. So when this link is completed in a few years, New Rochelle will have – listen to me – the closest station to Manhattan with direct access to both the east and west sides. Let me repeat that: the closest station to Manhattan with direct access to both the east and west sides.

Add Amtrak, too, and there will be literally no better place for commuting or reverse commuting in the entire tri-state area. That's a unique asset of incredible value that only New Rochelle will have.

All our hard work, coupled with New Rochelle's good bones – our history, walkability, location, housing stock, and above all, human diversity – put us in a position to seek a private sector partner to work at our side.

And at the end of 2014, we chose that partner. The City Council in a 7-0 bipartisan, enthusiastic vote brought on the real estate team RDRXR. That's Renaissance Downtowns (RD), plus RXR Realty. They may not have the most elegant name – “RDRXR” is a mouthful to say ten times fast. But that's less important than experience, commitment, and financing, and they have those things in abundance.

And this will be a partnership like none we've had before. Because we're not looking to develop this site or that site in isolation. We're looking to enhance our downtown as a whole – multiple sites, planned together, each location and use strengthening and supporting the other, preserving what works, changing what doesn't – through a framework called a master development agreement.

Now, when I speak to folks informally about this, I feel like there's this close competition

between excitement and confusion, and it's not always clear which is coming out on top. And that's natural, because this is a very different approach, it puts process before the specifics of any project, and that takes some getting used to.

If I get into all the details of the agreement, we'll be here until midnight, but I do want to cover the core of it, because it's important to understand how this will all work, and how we can all be involved. So bear with me.

First, RDRXR must spend a significant amount of their money, at their risk, right upfront to pay for a full environmental review, market analyses, and the independent consulting services that the City will use to oversee the whole process.

At the same time, the master developers will spearhead the most open and inclusive community outreach process we've ever seen. It's called Crowdsourced Placemaking, and it'll feature everything from traditional presentations, to meet-ups, to a social media and web presence that will give every resident a chance to suggest ideas and weigh in on what we'd like to see. This will be our plan.

Tonight, I can even make a bit of news by announcing that the Crowdsourced Placemaking process officially launches on April 1st, just eight days from now. That's no April Fool's joke, so mark your calendar.

If you want a head start, you can register your name right away at crowdsourcencr.com, that's crowdsourcencr.com. Sign up and you'll be included on everything going forward.

And if the Internet's not your thing, you'll be able to visit two local offices to get information, offer an opinion, build a personal relationship. They are literally joining our community.

In fact, right now you can say hello to their brand new local liaison, Ashley Aldrich. Ashley, stand up. Ashley's homegrown -- third generation New Rochellean and New Rochelle High School class of 2004. (Which makes a lot of us feel pretty old.) And she's eager to hear from you.

So there's no excuse for any of us to be disengaged from this process.

Next step – RDRXR will combine our community's input with their feasibility studies to propose a specific development program for New Rochelle, with components, sites, and phases all laid out. That's when the details start coming into focus.

And to approve that program, the City Council will consider and vote on new zoning – zoning that defines the range of development we'd accept, and then, within that range, allows developers to respond flexibly to conditions in the market.

It's already begun, and we're on track to reach that milestone by the end of the year, if not before.

Now, what does the master developer get in exchange for all that upfront planning and financial investment? What's the bait? They get an exclusive opportunity to develop all the publicly-owned properties within the downtown and transit district.

That's about ten acres in total, including municipal lots and garages, the train station, and even the library – although that last one is subject to the approval of the Library Board, and we all want to be sure that our Library comes out in the end as good or better.

Does that exclusive mean the developer can now just take those properties based on charm or good lucks? No. To actually acquire our land, they'll have to deliver. They'll have to preserve or replace the parking on site today. And they'll have to put up the construction financing necessary to build.

This isn't about pretty pictures or hopeful handshakes; it's about shovels in the ground.

And although the "exclusive" applies just to those City-owned properties, the zoning and RDRXR's environmental review will cover much wider territory, basically the entire Main Street and transit area, plus a good stretch of lower North Avenue. Hundreds of private properties. This is very important. Because what does that mean? It means other property owners or developers can get in on the action, with or without the master developer's involvement. In fact, by taking on the big financial and procedural burdens of the environmental review, RDRXR is, in effect, subsidizing other projects. It's a true rising tide that lifts all the boats.

Finally, to the extent any public subsidy is required to get things going – whether it's land transfers, or infrastructure, or tax incentives – it will have to meet a clear test: public benefits have to exceed public costs. In other words, there's no deal unless taxpayers come out ahead.

I know it's a lot to take in, but here's the big point: all these terms and transactions, all these rights and responsibilities come down to a simple thing: harnessing the engine of the free market to the vision and goals of our community.

So we can light that spark.

So we can have a downtown that pulses with life from end to end, and from top to bottom. Sidewalks filled with people. Restaurants and galleries spilling on to the street . . . innovation space, and biomed offices, and homes rising into the sky. A meeting place that appeals to everyone within our city. With the train at the center, each arrival like the beat of a heart, bringing more people from New York or Stamford, from Boston and from Washington – more people to think and do and shop and dream.

All the pieces are here, if only we put them together.

And remember that question from the typical CEO: “where are my employees going to live and how are they going to get to work?”

Hello.

Because of our efforts, because of our good bones, because of what we are about to do, there will be no place better prepared to answer that question loud and proud than New Rochelle, NY.

So the second leg of our stool, a good plan, is fully in place, and it's as strong as can be.

That leaves only the third leg. Good leadership.

Now, I hope you can tell I am committed to this heart and soul. I'm determined to make it happen or go down trying, and I've got the bumps and bruises to prove it. But let me be clear, when I talk about leadership, I am not referring to one Mayor, or six Council Members, I am talking about leadership from all of us.

Robert F. Kennedy had a lot of great lines. Most of them were uplifting, but some of them were just practical, and this is one of my favorites: “20% of the people are against everything all of the time.” In New Rochelle, I think it may be more like 25%. And those 25% show up to approximately 100% of our public hearings. That's not criticism, it's praise. I reserve my criticism for the 75% who aren't showing up.

So this is less a pledge and more a challenge. We need you.

Because, as excited and optimistic as I am, this is going to be hard.

There will be a hundred potential flashpoints. From the height of a building, to the terms of a financial deal, to the number of parking spaces – any one of which can be extracted from the whole picture and made the focus of its own mini-controversy, any one of which can sink the whole enterprise.

And there'll also be a hundred potential desires. I want a new opera house, or job training center, or museum, or dog run, or police substation, or rooftop soccer field, or whatever. By the way, all good ideas, that should be put out there, and any of which may actually get included.

But if we expect the project to carry every single one of our personal wishes, while still being profitable and fiscally responsible, then we will be sorely disappointed. It can't carry everything. No project can.

So we have to sort out the big picture from the details . . . and distinguish our principles from our preferences.

Personally, I'll be advocating for all sorts of things. But there are just four that rise above the rest: a net positive for taxpayers, green building standards and operation, iconic architecture that makes a statement from afar and creates a unique sense of place up close, and, of course, financial viability, so it actually gets built.

For me, so long as the final product fits within those four corners, I'm on board. Everything else is negotiable.

Your four corners may be different from mine. That's OK. All I'm saying is be clear in your own head what is a fundamental requirement upon which your support for the entire venture depends, and what is instead a point on which you can compromise for the greater good. And then encourage the same spirit of honest give and take among neighbors and friends.

The question can't be what's in it for me. It's got to be what's in it for us.

Finally, I'll tell you a secret. When it comes to governing, the easiest thing to do . . . is nothing. Nobody will get angry at you or call you names. You'll have shorter public hearings – that's for sure. And the blame won't necessarily fall on you as a community's future just slips away.

When you act, you accept the burden of all the trade-offs and compromises, all the imperfections and risks that separate wishes and dreams from real decisions in the real world. And sometimes you get it wrong. But it's the only way to get anywhere at all.

People sometimes say New Rochelle is divided, and like any family, we have our share of arguments. But if there is a divide, it's not the ones we usually talk about.

It's not between the north end and the south end. People want pretty much the same things everywhere.

It's not between liberals and conservatives or Democrats and Republicans, because ideology counts for next to nothing in local government.

The divide is between those who are content to simply complain about all that's wrong. And those who are ready to roll up their sleeves and take responsibility for making it right.

Well, if you are present here tonight, or if you are watching at home, or if you are reading these remarks as a transcript, then you are, by definition, interested in civic issues and concerned about our direction as a community. You have opinions, you have values, you have hopes. You are a leader. (Or you can be.)

It is your community. Your downtown.

So don't assume that others have it covered. Don't allow what needs to be a mature and hopeful discussion to be overwhelmed by the usual negativity and rumor. Stand up and be counted. Sign up for that website, come to meet-ups, attend public hearings, offer your ideas, listen to the ideas of others, and above all, give yourself permission to believe that we can do this.

And with that third leg put in place by all of us together, ladies and gentlemen, we will succeed.

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By focusing tonight exclusively on downtown development, it was not my intent to imply that it's the only thing that matters to New Rochelle. Far from it. In fact, I'd argue that this city, our city, is defined much more by flesh and blood than by brick and mortar.

To explain what I mean, let me close this untraditional State of the City in an equally untraditional way, by sharing with you a recent email exchange I had with a neighbor.

It began as a complaint about snow removal. Nothing unusual there. Certainly part of my job to address such matters to the best of my ability, and more often than not, the complaints are legitimate (although I think DPW did pretty well this season.) If that was

all, I wouldn't report it now.

But then his email went on to present a much broader critique of the City. A long list of discontents, comparing New Rochelle to a third world country, wondering why he was here, praising other towns for doing things better. And then asking pointedly "what is New Rochelle best at?"

It's a fair question. And a difficult question. And after reflecting for a while, this is what I wrote back. I wrote that New Rochelle is best at allowing people of vastly different backgrounds and circumstances to find their own valued place in a single community, to settle in a home that fits almost any kind of life or family, to be welcomed and supported in their goals, whatever those goals may be.

I wrote that, by its very nature, a city that is socio-economically diverse will never be able to fund certain kinds of services at the same level as a uniformly wealthy village. But that, for our family at least, it's an easy call.

We'll take that trade any day of the week, because the life experience our boys have acquired and will acquire, the better understanding of and empathy for humanity in all our highs and lows, is worth far more to us than any particular action or product of the government.

I believe that with all my heart. This is central to who we are in New Rochelle. It's such an important example for a world that is struggling and often failing to do it half as well. And I hope it's who we'll always be.

But, you know, the writer had a point, too. Because this quality of ours that makes New Rochelle special is also delicate, fragile. It depends on thousands of individual choices to be here, to stay here. Thousands of individual calculations, each balancing the dollars and faith we give a community against the pride and value we receive in exchange. And when too many of us feel a sense of inadequacy or inferiority, this essential balance is at risk.

That's where all this comes together.

In a few short years, God willing, Jeremy and Owen will be off to college. And after we've been bankrupted by the tuition payments, I hope they'll want to come back here, like their Dad did. But not just because they feel some sense of blind loyalty or have no other choices. I want the reason to be that it makes sense for them to be here. Because for a new generation of younger people who are talented and creative – and we all hope our own kids will grow up to fit that description – this will be a logical, accessible – even a thrilling – place to live.

A few more years after that, God willing again, Catie and I will be thinking about retiring. And I hope we'll want to stay here. But again, not just out of inertia or with a sense of sacrificing because we oughta. I hope we'll want to stay here because it will be the right place to retire, the right place to downsize, to enjoy more free time, to be connected to neighbors, to feel that everything is within easy reach, from the small needs that fill a day, to the entertainment and dining that fill a night, to the bigger things that fill a life.

And, of course, it's not about my family. We're just one tiny example among countless examples.

If we get this right. If we take advantage of the good economy. If we execute a good plan. If we show ourselves together to be good leaders. If we transform those feelings of inadequacy and inferiority into faith and pride, and give everyone from the biggest fan to the biggest skeptic a good reason to feel that their investment in this city is paid back in full, then it's not just our bank accounts and budgets that will be enriched by the right kind of development. It's our city's soul.

At times our hopes for the downtown have seemed discouragingly distant, at other times tantalizingly close. At times, we've crawled ahead, at other times we've shuffled sideways, or even inched backwards.

Ladies and gentlemen, this time, the track is wide open, our running shoes are laced up, our adrenaline is pumping, and we're ready at long last to race forward.

On your marks.

Get set.

Let's go.