



PEDRO E. SEGARRA
MAYOR

Text of Mayor Pedro E. Segarra's State of the City Remarks
5:00 p.m., Monday, March 12, 2012

Thank you very much.

Council President Wooden, Majority Leader Aponte, Minority Leader Deutsch, members of the Court of Common Council, guests, friends and family.

Hartford, Connecticut's Capital City, is a place of incredible history, innovation and culture. Whether you are grabbing an authentic Italian meal at Francesco's, experiencing the great works of art at the Wadsworth, enjoying jazz and dance at the Artists Collective or Charter Oak Cultural Center or learning about a homegrown legend such as Mark Twain, inspiration abounds.

It was Mark Twain who said "Truth is the most valuable thing we have." If we are going to move forward as a City we must adhere to that premise, and embrace our truths – not only what we have to celebrate, but the challenges before us. This evening, I want to share with you our truths, and share with you ways that we can build on all that is positive in our City.

At the start of this year, I asked four committed and talented residents to join me on the Board of Education: Dr. Jose Colon-Rivas, Dr. Cherita McIntye, HPL CEO Matt Poland and Attorney Rich Wareing. Their experience – in talent development, family education, literacy and fiscal analysis – brings a fresh set of eyes and an innovative approach to providing quality education for every child in Hartford. Working with Superintendent Dr. Christina Kishimoto and district staff, we will continue moving forward with the reform foundation that has been laid. We have already started the process of making critical decisions to put our schoolchildren first.

Last month, we celebrated the end of iQuilt's Winterfest at Bushnell Park. On any given day, hundreds of residents and visitors skated at the rink, supported our local businesses and infused downtown with the buzz of the season. When the rink closed on February 20th, nearly 50,000 people had put on skates – many for the very first time.

Winterfest was a way to rally our region around a shared project – iQuilt. The foundation of that project is Hartford's Intermodal Triangle, which has the support of Congressman Larson and Transportation Commissioner Jim Redeker. Through the creation of transit hubs, the Hartford Intermodal Triangle Project will strengthen the Capital Region's economic and employment core by improving pedestrian and vehicular connections within the Union Station-to-Main Street triangle.

A few weeks ago, I asked Jim Rovella of the Chief State's Attorney's Office to assume the responsibilities of Acting Police Chief. As the lead of the Shooting Task Force, the Hartford Police Department has seized over 50 weapons, made over 100 felony arrests and served more than 90 warrants. Acting Chief Rovella has detailed strategies to build upon this success and use other collaborative approaches to improve public safety in our neighborhoods.

I'm also proud to welcome Kristina Newman-Scott, our new Marketing Events and Cultural Affairs Director and Valda Washington, who will join the City as Human Resources Director later this month.

Last week, we hosted tens of thousands for the Big East women's tournament at the XL Center – which of course, our Women Huskies won! We were recognized by the media and visitors for presenting the City in its very best light, and I'm grateful to the Convention and Visitors Bureau and Mark McGovern and his team at the Hartford Parking Authority for making sure folks come back again and again.

This month, we learned that Moody's and Standard & Poor's had affirmed our City's A1 and Aa bond ratings and assigned Hartford a stable outlook. In maintaining our rating, Moody's indicated that the City was moving in the right direction financially, and that our fund balance levels were increasing. Despite what began as a structural deficit, we will end this fiscal year in the black, and Moody's has recognized that accomplishment. In addition, Standard & Poor's noted the City's improved financial position based on strong management practices and policies, and a well-funded pension plan. This is a direct result of the diligent and prudent efforts of our City Treasurer and Pension Commission, and the commitment of City staff to control spending, particularly Budget Director Jose Sanchez, Management & Budget Director Julio Molleda and Christian Johnson.

And next month we will kick off Hartford Beautiful, a collective commitment to improving the look of our City's parks and communities. The initiative will begin with the preliminary demolition of the Capitol West Building, in partnership with The Hartford.

Each of these accomplishments speak to our shared goals: that each City department will be professional and fiscally responsible; that by focusing on infrastructure, eliminating blight and strengthening public safety we will improve our neighborhoods; that we will align our community-wide educational resources; and that we will harness existing assets to support our business environment and maximize job retention and growth.

The implementation of these goals are culminated in a number of ways, but most strategically through our Livable and Sustainable Neighborhoods Initiative, which ensures the alignment of economic development projects to enhance the vibrancy of small businesses and provide a foundation for all neighborhood efforts; and Opportunities Hartford, which identifies the greatest existing opportunities in education, job readiness, career advancement and funnels public and private funds to invest in those opportunities.

These are the experiences and efforts upon which we can build, to grow and sustain our communities. But we have much work to do.

For years, Hartford has had an untenable tax structure. More than half of the properties in our City are tax exempt, and to lessen the burden on our homeowners, residential properties were taxed at 26 percent, while other municipalities charged 70 percent. Our businesses therefore had

to shoulder the remainder of those taxes, paying not only the 70 percent but a surcharge as well. We have seen – and continue to see – the results of that choice, one that has cost jobs and vitality. And while we are near 100 percent residential occupancy downtown, we will continue to build on our net gain, and recruit more new businesses.

In response to our dysfunctional tax scenario, our lawmakers developed legislation that would reduce the heavy burden on commercial taxpayers and allowed a gradual phase-in of the increased residential tax rate. Those were things we were able to influence. However, we could not change the nation's economic crisis and its impact on the real estate market, which drastically reduced property values. Despite our best efforts to prevent a catastrophic increase – which would have occurred had we done nothing – we now must address the significant loss in revenue that occurred when property values plummeted.

We must all commit to working in the best interest of our citizens to curtail spending while ensuring the provision of basic services and preserving quality of life. Governor Malloy last year talked about shared sacrifice; that is our truth as well. I am confident that I can count on every member of Council and every Department head to creatively and proactively respond to this with the urgency it demands. I have also asked our nonprofit neighbors to assist us during this trying economic time and more adequately support our Payments in Lieu of Taxes.

As I mentioned, the overall economic climate has resulted in job losses in the City. Our support of Capewell, Coltsville, Front Street and Sonesta has created and will create jobs, but increased employment opportunities are needed. And while our unemployment rate is the lowest it has been since November 2009, too many of our neighbors remain jobless. People who find themselves unable to meet their basic needs become hopeless, and for some that hopelessness manifests itself in a disregard for the law and their fellow man. As Mayor, I am committed to working with our businesses and state and federal government to create jobs, but I will not tolerate crime as a response to any situation.

People who are doing their best to provide for their families and contribute positively to their communities and to our City should not be victimized by anyone for any reason. Our Police Department's Community Service Officers have engaged new probationers and their families, and in the coming weeks we will be announcing prevention initiatives that enhance collaboration with probation and parole to address, prevent and reduce crime. But the importance of community involvement cannot be overstated. The strides we have made in solving violent crime were due in large part to residents assisting police, and police community relations are a priority that the Acting Chief and I share.

In addition, because we know that so many people enter and re-enter our communities looking for a second chance, I will be seriously examining how we as a city can be a better partner with police, courts, corrections and service providers to develop and oversee the coordination of the many systems that come into play for these citizens, especially with regard to family reunification. This is in addition to the continuing work of Opportunities Hartford, which has convened individuals and groups to expand opportunities for job readiness, job creation and education.

The most important commitment we must make – because it is tied to everything I have talked about – is to our children. Our Governor has outlined an ambitious education reform agenda, one that in many ways aligns with our own. Our businesses have told us that they need a skilled workforce. Those on both sides of the law have said that educational failure is a key contributor

to a life of crime. If we are to be the City of promise that so many innovators saw, we must nurture our children and provide them with the quality education they need to compete with their suburban and national peers.

Those efforts begin with early childhood education. We must seek governmental and private resources to expand early learning centers so that our children are where they need to be when they begin kindergarten. We must support the enhancement of quality school choices so that families can select the option that is best for them. We must closely review our policies to ensure that we are neither socially promoting nor pushing out our children. We must support those initiatives that recruit and retain the very best teachers. And most importantly, we must commit to our parents that we will clearly communicate how schools are performing and engage them as full partners in their children's success.

These are not new ideas. Maria Sanchez knew the importance of parental involvement. And Thelma Dickerson knew that we were not honoring our promise to our children. Neither of them ever gave up, and neither will we.

Our successes are there for us to build on. Our challenges are there for us to confront. And confront them we must. Despite our fiscal hurdles, we must find ways to support the initiatives that work, and we must do so in a manner that respects our taxpayers, that promotes efficiency in government and fosters accountability.

For centuries, Connecticut's Capital City has been recognized as a place where people have brought their dreams and watched them materialize. From the first settlers to folks who moved from the South, the Islands and other continents, we continue to draw leaders and pioneers. The State of our City is in that truth, and it is our most valuable resource. Our City is one of endless possibilities and unwavering perseverance.

Let's draw on our truth and stand together for those who need us most. Our residents, who want only to earn an honest living. Our families who want to know their loved ones are safe. Our neighbors, who have paid their debt and want to do right by their communities. And our children, who are counting on us to give them a fair shot at a bright future.

Together we can do this. Together we will define our truth.

God bless each of you and God bless the City of Hartford.

Thank you.