

Court of Common Council



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People's State of the City: first priorities

This is a moment to speak of opportunities before us, the good and bad things that are happening in the City. It is also a time to hear out the priorities for change from everyone, not just one Party or one person in a speech to you from a podium. We in Working Families Party want to hear from community organizations, unions, and you here today. Actually, we represent the majority, not “just” minority!

Before beginning, we must also recognize two great fighters for the people who have passed away this very week.

On Monday, Dr. Jack Lucas died at age 84. He was known to many of us for his commitment to peace, better international relations, and especially the Hartford-Ocotol Sister City Project, traveling to Nicaragua and raising money for projects there.

And just yesterday, we lost Richard Days, admired and loved for his dedication to workers, education, and racial and economic justice. Beginning in Flint, Michigan, he organized and educated for the UAW. Later, he traveled to Nigeria, Ghana, Spain, Sweden, and elsewhere. He was co-founder of the Connecticut Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, and served on the Bloomfield town council. His greeting was “Peace, Brother” – and even after his death, his heart is still beating and he is still organizing, just as he said.

Joe Hill: Don't mourn, organize.

For now, picture a City with some accomplishments lately but also serious problems that we here can address. Example: driving from center city up North Main Street, some fine new housing, even some specially for grandparents, where junk was before. But further up the street, broken-down and burned-out buildings. Driving south on Zion Street, same: nice renovations, but beyond still remain some blighted buildings with no successful city intervention so far.

In doing this, we focus on policies, lives and living conditions – on real people and places that make up Hartford – and won't get sidetracked into issues of personality, criminality, special interests, or politics as usual.

We talk first about City jobs and other economic activity. Some is out of our hands, at state, federal, and international levels – but we also need new policies right here in Hartford. We need good, well paying jobs within a cultured and safe environment.

Lately in Hartford many jobs have been lost, with layoffs, privatization, and outsourcing. We send money outside the city to low wage, profit-making, unaccountable companies, but right here we are losing renters, homeowners, businesses, taxpayers. And as usual, layoffs with loss of job and health insurance especially hurt Latinos, African-Americans, immigrants, and others with little reserves:

1. Rescind layoffs and avoid as a knee-jerk response to saving money. Consult with labor and City Council to improve services and efficiency.
2. Develop realistic incentives for hiring of city residents – with a good living wage.
3. Support family or locally owned small business, before tax breaks for large corporations.
4. Further develop energy-saving projects with Hartford-based businesses and employment; talked about, but not enough has happened.

Unions in the City, Education, and Library systems are being asked for givebacks, concessions, layoffs, and some have had no recent raises or contracts. At the same time, highly paid managers and consultants are hired, without the knowledge and approval of our City Council:

1. Follow City Council resolution (and Mayor's statement) for a real hiring freeze except when required by law or for a new project, and then only with public knowledge and Council approval first.
2. Insist on a budget with real cuts in high-level positions and pay, in order to keep front-line workers and good city services.
3. Real consultation with labor, City Council, and Mayor to improve efficiency to avoid layoffs and service cuts for citizens.

Other immediate issues before Council are fair hiring and a new City procurement policy. Another will reduce barriers and prejudice against formerly incarcerated people (get rid of the box), to let them to return to useful employment.

1. Complete through ordinance these affirmative measures.
2. Further pressure MDC for more training and hiring of City residents for our huge water project: monitoring and enforcement with work crews, getting determined people as Commissioners, and picketing if necessary for public attention.

For finance and revenue, tax collection and health benefit administration have been privatized or sent out of state. Many citizens are inconvenienced, don't get answers, and get charged extra fees:

1. Bring these functions back for accountable City operation.
2. Help homeowners and small businesses have automated regular tax contributions (escrow accounts) to avoid high burden two or four times a year.

Freedom of Information: the Public, Press, and even City Council has had to appeal for information that should be freely available. It is ours, like the floor under your feet and the sidewalks on the street. And we need lively public participation with responsive and

independent media to meet the needs of workers and families for everyday news and information.

1. Stop the waste of money and legal time of Corporation Counsel with delays, denials, and Freedom of Information appeals.
2. Helpful and requested information (except protected personal data) must be released directly or put in public libraries or web site.

Charter Revision: insist on fair and minority representation for all views, in Council, legal opinions, publicity, and meetings.

1. Selection of Boards and Commissions and other positions to be representative of City's population and all political, ethnic, and minority viewpoints.
2. Attorneys for the City shall be responsive to all branches of government and the people of the City.

School system: making large reserve, contingency, and bonded funds and planning more new buildings is unrealistic -- at the same time that teachers, custodians, special ed, guidance counselors, music and trade teachers are being laid off.

1. No layoffs of front-line staff while money is spent for reserves and highly paid supervisors.
2. There is plenty of need for construction workers on jobs for school and housing repair, renovation, and energy conservation --much more than new school construction without enough teachers and custodians. And maximize use of Federal stimulus funds before City spending and bonding.
3. Any plans and final decisions must be shared by the School Board with PTO's and City Council through a process of to develop improved community schools and curricula.

Library system: we must continue to have one, which is active, lively in its branches and centrally, and supports City activities for education, arts, materials and instruction, computer skills, homework. Libraries are especially needed in hard economic times, for help in English and other languages, tax preparation, classes, and cultural exhibits and performance.

1. Maintain support for independence and adequate funding, for cooperation with community organizations and services.

Neighborhood blight remains a problem.

1. Enforce anti-blight and environmental ordinances more than they have been, with enough City workers for inspection and enforcement.
2. Neighborhood groups must be given support and responses from City departments when blighted properties are identified.
3. Use NRZ receivership power (City take over and use rent for fixing) to prevent abandonment and waste of property.

Housing and homelessness: we know that shelters are important but not the whole answer. Regional measures for supportive and transitional housing are needed and more economical. Lately, families have been forced out of apartments and houses through foreclosure or remodeling with rents going out of reach. Some become homeless or move out of town for lower taxes and rent -- while houses and apartments in Hartford are empty or abandoned.

1. Find vacancies and affordable housing through publicly-

and privately- owned buildings, including the Hartford Housing Authority. Use City receivership power to take over and fix.

2. Stop city sales of tax liens and idle properties to speculators.

3. Our departments should develop programs for sweat equity, homesteading, and neighborhood block engagement with material and financial support for renovating and building.

Finally, National stimulus packages from Washington, Neighborhood Stabilization, shovel-ready, CDBG grants must, as the President has said, above all be held to transparency, accountability and real democracy. Encourage active participation by taxpayers, neighborhoods, and City Council, rather than make plans top-down. We can't repeat at the local level the wasteful mistakes made nationally with give-always to banks and insurance giants.

1. Require a better City process of close review in public meetings with community groups and City Council for setting priorities. This is participatory democracy.

Overall, we must have City government with policies that do this: keep jobs that benefit families and workers and small businesses within the City -- before sending profits to outside corporations and agencies.

This is the real work for City Council, the Mayor, the whole government – and all of us concerned about our lives right here. Today and in the future, we must more than ever ask questions, be informed, and be active.

Thanks for listening and reading. Now it's time for you and other to take the stage and speak out.